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The Political Reform and the Amharic Biweekly *Reporter*: The Editorial Contents of the *Reporter* Newspaper in Ethiopia from 2017 to 2019

Abstract

This research examines the agenda and frames used by the Reporter newspaper editorial coverage of issues and actors before and after the reform in Ethiopia. The study applies quantitative content analysis method and examined 99 (Period 1 = 57 and Period 2 = 42) editorials in all periods. The source of data and the period of data collection were purposely selected. The results indicated that societal issue, government and party issues were frequent in both periods. Professional journalist was the only Author in both periods. More government criticism and more reforms were mentioned before the reform. Compared with editorials published before and after the reform, noticeable changes were observed in government critique, attribution of responsibility frames, human interest frames and economic issue frames. However, content selection, sources of information, mentioned reforms, conflict relationship frames and ideological frames didn't have relationship with date of publication. Finally, the Reporter editorials coverage did change significantly in many respects, although it is difficult to determine the causes of the changes-economic factors, reduced political control, social changes or globalization forces.

Keywords: agenda, frame, editorial, reporter newspaper

1. Introduction

This research explores the print media agenda trends in Ethiopia, following a new political reform in 2018. The research chose The Reporter newspaper purposely as it has been the only few sustained private newspapers for long time in Ethiopia. The reform date was taken as a frame of reference to check whether reporting style, agenda, tone, and source varies.

1.1. Background

Ethiopia is the second populous country in Africa. The country has gone through a number of dictator regimes. The current ruling party took the power for 27 years and its name is Ethiopian People Republic Democratic Front (EPRDF). In 1991, the press law was pro-

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claimed, and a number of private presses flooded in the country; however, following 2005 election, except few, almost all of them were intimidated and closed. Among few private presses which were not closed is the Reporter newspaper.

In Ethiopia, Article 29 of the constitution, which was adopted verbatim from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), has been faithfully implemented. The article states everyone has the right to hold opinions without intrusion and to freedom of expression without any interference. It goes onto say that this right shall include freedom to receive, seek and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in print or in writing, in the form of art, or through any media of his/her choice. It also stipulates that freedom of the press and other mass media and freedom of artistic creativity is guaranteed and sets out the specific elements it constitutes. In addition, it offers that any citizen who violates any legal limitations on the exercise of these rights may be held responsible under the law. Moreover, Ethiopia is a signatory to other international instruments asserting the fundamental importance of freedom of expression including, the UDHR, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa, the Windhoek Declaration, the African Charter on Broadcasting and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) program. These instruments would also have gone a long way to amplifying the constitution's protection of press freedom if they had seen the light of day. There still lie testing challenges ahead.

Though the press has a 120-year history in Ethiopia, the private press began full-fledged operations just 21 years ago. As a promising profession, it is affected with a raft of internal and external problems. A significant chunk of the private press is devoid of a code of conduct and editorial policy; it also suffers from chronic organizational weaknesses and the propensity to spurn neutrality and display political activism. The pathetic state of the various journalists' associations and the blatant factionalism characterizing the private press also serve to demonstrate this point. The problem is compounded by the government's reluctance to provide incentives for and overt animosity towards the private press. This was evidenced by Ethiopia's designation as the fifth worst jailer of journalists in the world and its enactment of a draconian mass media law. The testing challenges that attended the founding of the press council have left a scar on the right to organize the press. Although the media council was officially established after many trials and misfortunes in September 2016 with 19 media institutions and journalists' associations, its failure to be registered to date on account of the non-existence of an allowing entity has troupe a cloud over its future. No solution has been found to the problem in spite of bringing the matter to the attention of several government organizations.

After the military regime step down in 1991, the press and its freedom have revealed remarkable change. During transition, the government has taken significant measures which ensure the freedom and development of the press. The most important one is the declaration of the freedom of press which includes the right of expression without restriction and censorship. In addition, a press law has also been codified for the first time. This changes in the legal and institutional sphere resulted for the spread of private press in the country. As such, the new EPRDF led government has come up with various institution provision and embodiments. It sought to ensure the freedom of the press as well as its growth a popular as a viable institution of democracy and the building of democratic society and culture.

Accordingly, its guarantee is that any individual can form a private press institution and perform all the legitimate and responsible activity of press. The freedom of the press is also incorporated in the FDRE constitution and further detailed by the press law. The time between 1991 and 1992 could be said to be one of the freest times in the history of the Ethiopian private press as there was no need to formally register in order to own and run a newspaper or a magazine (PMC, 2006). This trend, however, was short lived as proclamation 34/92 came into effect with requirements for pre-publication registration and licensing formalities for the private press. This period witnessed several papers and magazines produced by some who were simply zealous to do journalism and some who had a cause, and a few others who wanted to earn a living out of newspaper publishing.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Ethiopia is one of the biggest countries in Eastern Africa (its population estimated to be over 100 million) has a short-lived history of a private press. Both the imperial regime of Haile Sellasie and the military regime, the Dergue, controlled the tasks of the private press. The defeat of the military regime in 1991 created a prospect for the private press to come into presence. The private newspapers are believed to have voiced alternative views for the past two decades because the two national dailies: Addis Zemen (Amharic) and the Ethiopian Herald (English) as well as the electronic media (Ethiopian Television and Radio) have been controlled by the Government. The military regime, the Dergue, with its "Ethiopia First" discourse left no room for freedom of the press in practice. Hence, the private press faced many internal and external challenges. The external challenges included pressure from the government, lack of getting access to information from government officials, a low reading culture, cost of publication and distribution. Furthermore, lack of technical and professional expertise, financial instability, and ethical problems are related within the private print media themselves (Shimelis, 2006,).

Though they are considered as an elite media (primarily used by the educated section of society especially catering for the urban population and mainly the Capital Addis Ababa), the private-print media with its limitations (educational, professional, cultural, legal, political etc.) are believed to play a positive role by notifying society. The print media have focused on various topics ranging from the social, cultural, economic, and political up to entertainment and sports (Article 19, 2003).

The Ethiopian private press is blamed for partiality in reporting the government in negative terms (Shimelis, 2000; Hailemarkos, 2006). Research conducted on two private and two government-owned ones to evaluate their coverage of political parties during the 2005 election. The result revealed that the two private newspapers (Ethiop-now defunct, and Addis Admas) allotted much of their space for accusation by the opposition against the ruling party-100% and 76% consecutively. The same result was replicated by the government English daily and The Ethiopian Herald that put 100% of the blame on the opposition (Hailemarkos, 2006).

A more recent study on the private print media in Ethiopia arrived at a pessimistic conclusion, questioning their role and forming uncertainty on their capacity in helping the transition to democracy, describing them as constitutionally motivated (Skjerdal, &Hallelijah, 2009). Viewing them as partisans of the opposition, the Ethiopian government responded to

the deeds of the private press in different terms ranging from denying access to government held information to imprisonment of journalists and owners (Skjerdal, & Hailelujah, 2009).

It is shown that comparison between private and government print media reporting were conducted by many scholars. The result showed that the media became polarized. Researches showed that many newspapers were banned after 2005 election but reporter was not. Researches were conducted in the Reporter newspaper: its circulation in comparison with private and government newspapers, its development reporting compared with government newspapers, political framing compared with private and government newspapers. Besides these, at the start of its publication, the Reporter was critical to the government, but it changed to soft area of criticism. As the new political reform has come into existence in Ethiopia since 2018, the media and journalists have got relief from intimidations. Therefore, the researcher wanted to compare the contents of 'Reporter newspaper (Amharic biweekly)' based on different time frames whether it was consistent or not before and after the new reform in Ethiopia.

1.3. Objectives

The major objective of this study is to examine the contents of the Reporter Newspaper editorials before and after the new reform in Ethiopia.

1.4. Research questions

1. Which contents of the Reporter newspaper editorial were frequently chosen before and after the new reform in Ethiopia?

2. Is there any similarity or difference between sourcing editorials before and after the new reform in Ethiopia?

3. What kind of frames was dominantly used in the Reporter newspaper editorials before and after the reform?

4. Does the Reporter newspaper editorial contents have relationship with date of publication?

2. Theoretical framework

The investigation of these research questions is mainly based on the theories of agenda-setting and framing. As notable media effect theories, agenda-setting and framing paradigms provide for the theoretical frameworks through which the degree of salience and descriptions can be studied (Fourie, 2001).

2.1. Conceptual Overview of Agenda setting theory

Historically, agenda-setting theory has contributed to the resurgence of moderate effects of the media after the era of limited media effects claimed by Lazarsfeld and his colleagues (1944) and Klapper (1960). Indeed, McCombs and Shaw's (1972) findings of the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda stimulated scholars to re-evaluate their thinking about the relationship of the media and the public. Agenda-setting theory set its place with this theoretical and methodological development and its multi-faceted applicability in various fields such as politics, business, and culture. If a successful theory is judged by its

potentials in generating new inquiries and venues of research (Conant, 1951), agenda setting clearly is one of the few in communication that has passed the muster of such tests. As Mc-Combs and Shaw (1993) opined more than two decades ago, agenda setting had accumulated a healthy share of its literature, integrated other theories in its inquires, and developed a number of subfields along its historical growth.

Most agenda-setting research still tends to focus on newspapers and TV rather than other media. However, the prevalence of new media such as the Internet and social media calls for more attention from future researchers to examine these new media channels. In particular, considering that the Internet and social media are horizontal media which provide different kinds of information to different target audiences, additional work on agenda setting remains to be done in order to further study individual differences in agenda-setting effects. Consistent with McCombs' (2004, 2005) prediction that agenda-setting theory would expand to new contexts, the findings suggest that agenda-setting research has been conducted in many different domains.

The media has the ability to influence the visibility of events in the public mind as the press selectively chooses what people see or hear in the media. Agenda setting refers to the idea that there is a strong relationship between the emphasis that mass media places on certain issues and the importance endorsed to these issues by mass audiences (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). They describe media's role as the agenda setters and the media's ability to influence public opinion by setting the agenda of what people think about. In this research, agenda setting theory has been used to compare the contents of The Reporter newspaper in Ethiopia before and after April, 2018 since political reform began on the stated time.

Further, the media have a paramount importance in news items priorities. The media give some news events more prominence than others. It is believed that people form attitudes based on the thoughts that are most prominent when they make decisions (Hastie & Park, 1986) that ultimately shape the considerations they take into account when making judgments about political leaders. Scheufele (2000) observed that agenda setting looks on story selection as a determinant of public perceptions of issue importance through priming and evaluations of political leaders. Along with the manner in which the news is presented, the frequency of publication plays an important role. Readers tend to consider items which are reported on frequently as being very important.

The basic intention of agenda-setting theory can be stated broadly as elements that are prominent on the media agenda over time frequently converted prominent on the public agenda. The discussion of attribute agenda-setting explicitly introduced the conceptual language of objects and attributes that can be operationalized in many ways other than public issues.

There are several agendas in present-day society. Recently, researchers have practiced the central idea of agenda-setting theory, the transfer of salience from one agenda to another, to a wide multiplicity of new arenas as miscellaneous as professional sports (Fortunato, 2001) and classroom teaching (Díaz, 2004). One rapidly escalating area is the business news agenda and its impact on corporate reputations and economic outcomes ranging from profits to stock prices (McCombs, 2004). The internet is a major research frontier not only the traditional but also new domains of agenda-setting. For some observers, the obtainability of many channels and the opportunity for users to seek their own personal agendas challenges a basic tenet of agenda-setting which the media tend to share the same set of news priorities. Thus, the argument goes to the power of the mass media to set the public agenda may disappear. The evidence currently shows that courtesy to news on the web tends to be more highly con-