MAPPING DIGITAL MEDIA:

DIGITAL MEDIA, CONFLICT AND DIASPORAS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

By Iginio Gagliardone and Nicole Stremlau

OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

Digital Media, Conflict and Diasporas in the Horn of Africa

WRITTEN BY

Iginio Gagliardone and Nicole Stremlau[1]

The Horn of Africa is one of the least connected regions in the world. Nevertheless, digital media play an important social and political role in Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia (including South-Central Somalia and the northern self-declared independent Republic of Somaliland). This paper shows how the development of the internet, mobile phones and other new communication technologies have been shaped by conflict and power struggles in these countries.

It addresses some of the puzzles that characterize the media in the region: for example, how similar rates of penetration of media such as the internet and mobile phones have emerged in Somalia, a state which has not had a functioning government for two decades, and in Ethiopia, one of the countries with the most pervasive and centralized political apparatus in Africa.

The paper also gives particular attention to the role played by diasporas, which have been highly influential in starting the first websites, blogs and forums covering the politics of the Horn and facilitating debates among Eritreans, Ethiopians and Somalis living at home or abroad.

The paper concludes by discussing the often-innovative, but little acknowledged, ways in which digital media have blended with their predecessors to fashion unique hybrid media and communications systems.

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Figure 1.
Horn of Africa
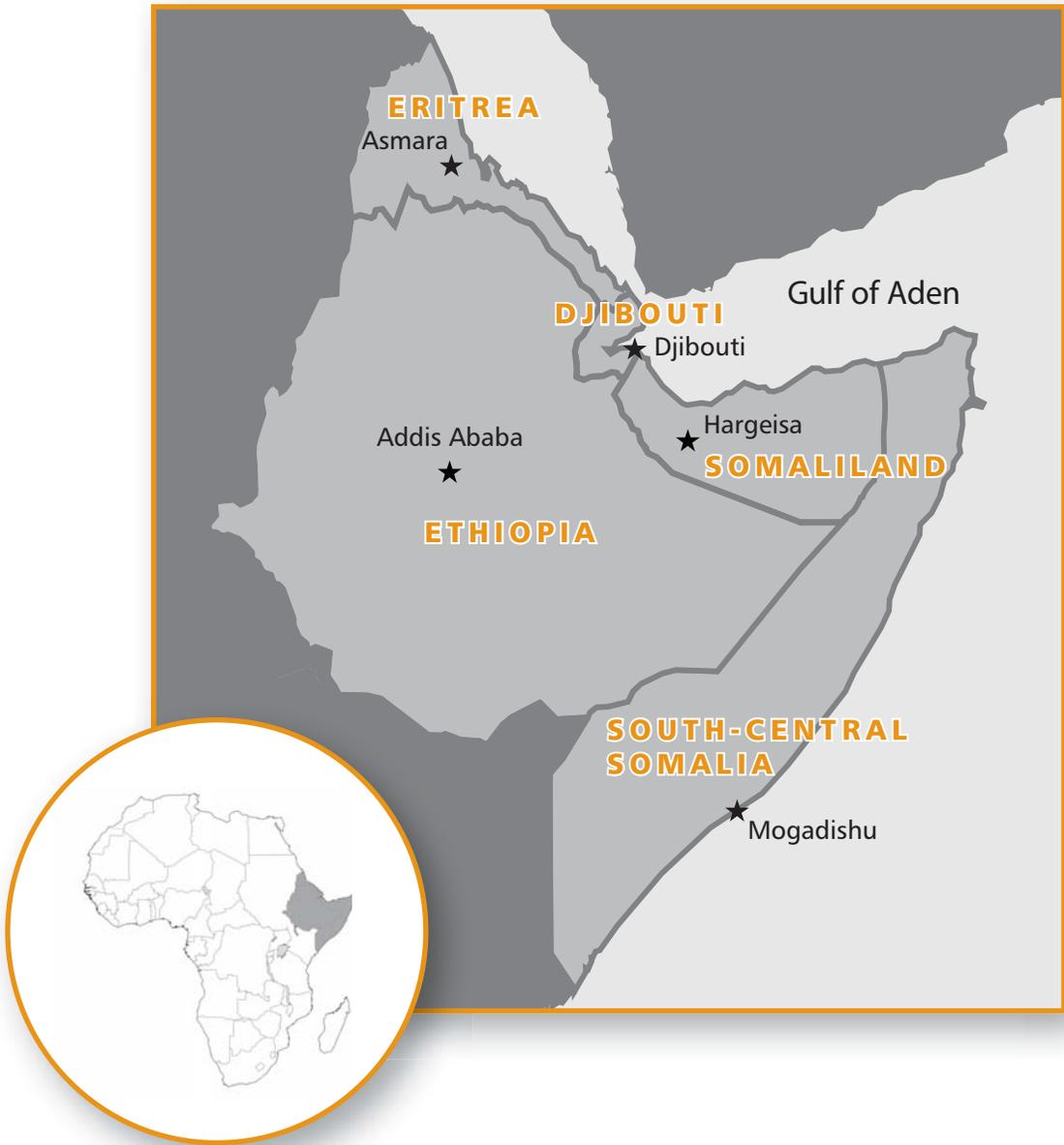
Mapping Digital Media

The values that underpin good journalism, the need of citizens for reliable and abundant information, and the importance of such information for a healthy society and a robust democracy: these are perennial, and provide compass-bearings for anyone trying to make sense of current changes across the media landscape.

The standards in the profession are in the process of being set. Most of the effects on journalism imposed by new technology are shaped in the most developed societies, but these changes are equally influencing the media in less developed societies.

The Media Program of the Open Society Foundations has seen how changes and continuity affect the media in different places, redefining the way they can operate sustainably while staying true to values of pluralism and diversity, transparency and accountability, editorial independence, freedom of expression and information, public service, and high professional standards.

The **Mapping Digital Media** project, which examines these changes in-depth, aims to build bridges between researchers and policy-makers, activists, academics and standard-setters across the world.

The project assesses, in the light of these values, the global opportunities and risks that are created for media by the following developments:

- the switchover from analog broadcasting to digital broadcasting
- growth of new media platforms as sources of news
- convergence of traditional broadcasting with telecommunications.

As part of this endeavor, the Open Society Media Program has commissioned introductory papers on a range of issues, topics, policies and technologies that are important for understanding these processes. Each paper in the **Reference Series** is authored by a recognised expert, academic or experienced activist, and is written with as little jargon as the subject permits.

The reference series accompanies reports into the impact of digitization in 60 countries across the world. Produced by local researchers and partner organizations in each country, these reports examine how these changes affect the core democratic service that any media system should provide – news about political, economic and social affairs. Cumulatively, these reports will provide a much-needed resource on the democratic role of digital media.

The **Mapping Digital Media** project builds policy capacity in countries where this is less developed, encouraging stakeholders to participate and influence change. At the same time, this research creates a knowledge base, laying foundations for advocacy work, building capacity and enhancing debate.

The **Mapping Digital Media** is a project of the Open Society Media Program, in collaboration with the Open Society Information Program.

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Approaching media through a regional or state-centric prism can be deceptive, suggesting similarities among countries and peoples that are profoundly diverse. The sedentary and hierarchical societies that characterize the Abyssinian Highlands, extending from northern Ethiopia into Eritrea, are significantly different from the nomadic and largely egalitarian Somali social formations that stretch well into the Ogaden region of eastern Ethiopia. Similarly, the culture and communicative norms of the Oromos in southern Ethiopia or the Nuer in western Ethiopia often have more in common with their kin in Kenya or Sudan.

Differing external influences have had a significant role in reshaping societies. Eritrea and Somalia came under Italian and British rule during colonial times, but Ethiopia was only very briefly occupied by an external force. And while for most of the Cold War period all three countries gravitated towards the Eastern bloc, today they have very different positions on the international stage. Ethiopia was for years considered a "darling" of the West for its economic policies and the ruling party's apparent commitment to stability and development, making it the largest recipient of aid in Africa.[2] Somalia, on the contrary, has been labelled as the world's worst case of a failed state, unable to establish a viable government outside breakaway Somaliland. And the head of Eritrea's government, President Isaias Afewerki, is generally regarded as an unstable autocrat.

Addressing the evolution of digital media in the Horn of Africa as a whole, however, highlights some of the factors that the three neighbors share. The persistence of violent conflict within and across borders and the role of the diaspora in influencing politics back home have uniquely shaped new interactive spaces. Historic patterns of political marginalization have turned Ethiopian diaspora blogs and forums into one of the most vocal and unfettered spaces to oppose the incumbent government. In contrast, Eritrean diasporic communities have mostly been supportive of the Eritrean national project, and have used the web to engage and contribute to government-led initiatives. Only very recently has President Afewerki's increasingly despotic and erratic leadership started to alienate some of his staunchest supporters.

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2. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Development Cooperation Report 2010*, available at http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/download/fulltext/4310031e.pdf?expires=1328007032&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=4BA81CADCCC4D35E7435697D938EE8C3.

II. Conflict

In the early 1990s, when the first internet browsers were laying the foundations of the digital revolution, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia were struggling to reconstitute themselves after years of civil war. Rebel groups that were backed by significant popular support had ended the dictatorships of Siad Barre of Somalia and Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia, encouraging international optimism about the future of the region. Rebel leaders in Ethiopia and Eritrea were considered to belong to a new generation of African leaders who might usher in an African renaissance.[3] Unfortunately, this vision failed to materialize and varying levels of violent conflict have continued across the region.[4]

Somalia disintegrated into several fragments including: South-Central Somalia, which is nominally governed by the weak internationally-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG), but whose territory is in reality largely controlled by al-Shabaab, affiliated to al-Qaeda; Puntland, which has achieved some stability and aspires to have a central role in a unified Somalia; and Somaliland, the northern region that has achieved significant success in building peace and a democratic and participatory government, albeit with some authoritarian tendencies, particularly in relation to media. Ethiopia and Eritrea, after having been at war between 1998 and 2000, continued along a path towards becoming relatively stable one-party states, using different means, but sharing similar objectives, to coerce consensus among their citizens and to repress the emergence of opposition voices.

The continued conflicts have had significant repercussions on how the governments and leaders in power have formulated media policies.

In Ethiopia, the development of the media has been shaped by the ideology of revolutionary democracy, a Leninist approach that emphasizes the role of a politically astute and dominant party directing policies from the center but with some limited consultation with the masses. While a very limited degree of freedom

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3.   M. Ottaway, *Africa's New Leaders,* Carnegie Endowment, Washington, D.C., 1999; D. Connell and F. Smyth, "Africa's New Bloc," *Foreign Affairs* 77 (1998)**,** pp. 80–94, 82.

4.   J. Prendergast and C. Thomas-Jensen, "Blowing the Horn," *Foreign Affairs* 86 (2007)**,** pp. 59–74, 71.

of expression has been tolerated, particularly among the press until the highly contested 2005 multi-party elections, it was within the framework of this political project.

In Eritrea, where the government has been driven by similar revolutionary theories, the respect for party doctrine has been reinforced by purges of dissenting voices and a robust propaganda machine. As the challenges for governments struggling to consolidate political power have become more formidable over the years, media outlets that offered spaces for alternative perspectives (predominantly of elites) on fundamental questions of national identity have largely been closed down.

Given the ongoing violence in South-Central Somalia, it is difficult to identify any coherent ideology that might be driving media policy. Market forces, particularly the thriving telecommunications industry, are certainly the most influential factor—and the same is true of the lively, privately owned radio sector. The freedom of expression agenda supported by international media development agencies, such as the BBC World Service Trust,[5] and local stakeholders including the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ),[6] often overlaps with the interests of media and technology companies such as HornAfrik Radio and Hormuud Telecom, that seek unfettered access to the markets. In addition, the diaspora and warlords use the media to promote their own immediate political and economic agendas. There is a particular struggle in the areas controlled by al-Shabaab.

In contrast, media policy in Somaliland reflects the complicated balance between media freedom and security. As in other policy areas, Somalilanders have adopted a pragmatic approach. Concerned about political capture and the possible role of the media in promoting violence, as in other parts of Somalia, there are reservations about allowing private radio stations to broadcast. While there is a strong culture of freedom of expression among Somalis, many Somalilanders feel they are "hostages of peace", worried about losing a delicate peace which is the fruit of a struggle to reconcile and rebuild their country in the absence of international assistance. The legacy of war and the ongoing violence have prevented the diffusion of new communication technologies and have limited their use for development and participation. Today the Horn of Africa is one of the least connected regions in the world. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), apart from Djibouti, only 1 percent of the population has access to a fixed telephone line. And despite the enormous leap in mobile telephony in Africa, in 2010 less than 4 percent of Eritreans and around 7 percent of Ethiopians and Somalis owned a mobile phone. In the same year, only 0.75 percent of the population in Ethiopia, 1.15 percent in the whole of Somalia and 5.40 percent in Eritrea were registered by the ITU as internet users.[7]

5. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/whatwedo/where/africa/somalia/.

6. See http://www.nusoj.org/.

7. See ITU data on fixed and mobile phones and on internet usage in 2010, available at http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/material/excel/2010/FixedTelephoneLines00-10.xls; http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/material/excel/2010/MobileCellularSubscriptions00-10.xls; http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/material/excel/2010/FixedInternetSubscriptions00-10.xls. Since Somaliland is not internationally recognized, the data provided by the ITU include both Somaliland and South-Central Somalia. Figures for internet penetration do not account for usage in cybercafés.

These figures, however, have to be regarded with caution. First, in conflict areas such as South-Central Somalia and in closed societies like Eritrea, access to reliable data can be extremely difficult. Second, apparent similarities, such as the level of mobile and internet penetration between Ethiopia and Somalia, can hide the diverse trajectories that have characterized the evolution of these technologies in very different contexts. The low penetration of the internet in Ethiopia, for example, should be seen as part of a post-war strategy adopted by a government seeking to consolidate political power and minimize the risk of adversarial voices disrupting its political and ideological agenda. This strategy has included the monopoly of telecommunications, the imposition of high prices for internet access and the privileging of government use of the telecom infrastructure as compared to private use.

In Somalia, by contrast, despite the ongoing violence, there has been a remarkable proliferation of telecoms companies, offering inexpensive and high-quality services in the areas where they operate, including internet access, international calls, and mobile connectivity. Some of them are closely connected with the remittance industry, represented by companies such as Dahabshiil, the owner of Somtel.[8] Another remittance company, that was closed by the U.S. government after 11 September 2001, Al Barakat, has since become a major player in the telecoms industry, with Telesom in Somaliland, Golis in Puntland, and Hormuud in South-Central Somalia. Paradoxically, in South-Central Somalia this transformation has been facilitated by the lack of a central authority capable of regulating the industry, with the result that telecoms companies have been able to operate largely unfettered by government oversight.

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8.   See http://www.dahabshiil.com/.

III. Diasporas

The numerous conflicts afflicting the Horn have produced several waves of migration. In each country, the relationship between members of the diaspora and their homeland is characterized by a set of unique traits and by various degrees of support for, or opposition to, governments back home. In all cases, however, transnational media, from shortwave radio to satellite television and the internet, have been employed as means for diaspora members to recreate or reinvigorate links with their countries of origin, and—more recently—for national governments to extend their ability to interact with relevant constituencies abroad.

The first websites for Somalis, Ethiopians, and Eritreans were started by members of these communities living in the United States or Europe, and most of the popular platforms for discussing Somali, Ethiopian, and Eritrean culture and politics still run on servers abroad. When narrowing the focus to politics, the diaspora's mediated voices have played an important role in their homelands, either backing governments' actions, such as in the case of Eritrean bloggers supporting the war against Ethiopia, or presenting alternatives to the narrative articulated by those in power, for example advancing the idea of Ethiopian unity against the government's project of building Ethiopia as an ethnic federation. In some cases, particularly among the diaspora from South-Central Somalia, the digital media appear not only to reflect the ongoing violence but also to have played a role in facilitating or enabling it.

III.1   Eritrea

The evolution of digital media in Eritrea looks paradoxical. This was the last country in Africa to be connected to the internet (in 2000), but in 2010 it registered the highest percentage of internet users in the Horn (5.4 percent), except for Djibouti.[9] It is the only country on the continent with no private media outlets, and the state-owned media are vehicles for aggressive propaganda celebrating the country's fighters and the government's political project, which is based on self-sufficiency and resistance to external influences in the

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9.   This paper does not consider Djibouti, where the percentage of internet users in 2010 was 6.5 percent (ITU).

form of development aid or foreign inward investment.[10] It is also now the only country in Africa with no plans for fibre optic communications to neighboring countries, Europe, and North America (see section V. below). As a result, prices will likely remain high and obstruct the growth of mobile internet.

President Afewerki has shown little tolerance of criticism, and many journalists and political opponents have been imprisoned without a trial. Despite this climate of intolerance, however, the internet in Eritrea is relatively uncensored. Websites that are critical of the regime are blocked by only two of the four internet service providers (ISPs), and are thus accessible to Eritreans who are willing to risk to read their posts. Due to the high cost of private internet connections, most internet users go online through cybercafés, exposing themselves to the risk of observation by government agents disguised as customers.

These contradictions become less obscure, however, when the content of the websites targeting Eritrean audiences is analyzed in the context of the Eritrean diaspora and its history. In contrast to other authoritarian countries, such as Tunisia under President Ben Ali and Egypt under President Mubarak, where the internet represented a space for citizens to voice their anger against the government, and organize and build political alternatives, the "Eritrean internet" has generally been supportive of the government. Popular discussion forums such as Dehai.org, which started even before Eritrea was connected to the internet, and hence functioned as a meeting space for the diaspora, have been largely sympathetic towards the regime. They may host criticism of specific policies or decisions, but they do not question the legitimacy and authority of the government or its national project. Similarly, websites that later turned into spaces for voicing more fundamental or challenging critiques, such as Asmarino. com, initially started as sympathetic to the government.

To explain this unusual level of support for an autocracy, it is worth considering both online and offline forms of relationship between the diaspora and the homeland. President Afewerki's party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), known as the Eritrean

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10.   Reporters Without Borders places Eritrea last in its Press Freedom Ranking for 2010. See http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2010,1034.html.

People's Liberation Front (EPLF) at the time of the guerrilla struggle that led to Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia, has developed a unique set of strategies to engage the Eritrean diaspora. In the 1970s and 1980s, civil society organizations were created in Europe and in the United States to support the EPLF's struggle both financially and ideologically. After independence, most of these activities were taken over by Eritrean embassies.

The government charges a 2 percent tax per year on the income of every Eritrean living abroad, but it also recognizes the Eritrean citizenship of every person born to one Eritrean parent and makes it easy for Eritreans abroad to maintain dual citizenship. Over the years, the EPLF/PFDJ has supported a myriad organizations and activities to popularize the national cause (as defined by itself) among diaspora members. But "unlike cases where transnational policies and practices have expanded socio-political and economic participation, Eritrean transnationalism has forged a heavily circumscribed field in which one participates on the state's terms or risks retribution."[11]

In the long term, this strategy has produced vocal supporters of the Eritrean cause and a silent crowd of Eritreans who are increasingly sceptical of the PDFJ's national project, but are afraid to dissent because of the risk of retaliation against family members at home or of marginalization within their diasporic community.

III.2 Ethiopia

The development of digital media in Ethiopia, while similar to the path taken by other authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes, has certain distinctive characteristics. Ethiopia is the only country in Africa with a state monopoly over telecoms, despite strong pressure from international organizations, foreign countries and corporations to liberalize the market. As argued by a high-ranking Ethiopian technocrat: "Monopoly is a crucial factor. It is exactly because ICTs are so important and they have the capacity to penetrate every aspect of our lives that we have to make sure that it is the state that is in charge of using and implementing them. In this phase we cannot leave it to the market. ICTs are too key for our development. They are a priority. Behind the decision of leaving the monopoly in the ICTs and telecommunication market there is big philosophical thinking. It is not just because we want to make money from the use of telecoms."[12]

The mix of commitment to using new technology and fear that the same technology could unsettle existing power structures is reflected in the government's massive efforts to use digital media in schools and government offices (as will be described in greater detail below), and the neglect of providing reliable and affordable internet connections in the major towns, including the capital. In 2010, Ethiopia had one of the lowest internet penetration rates in the world (a meagre 0.75 percent). Despite the very limited diffusion of the internet among Ethiopian citizens, in 2006 the government began to actively filter the websites of opposition

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11. T. Hepner, "Transnational governance and the centralization of state power in Eritrea and exile," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31(3) (2008), p. 483.

12. Interview in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 12 June 2008.

groups and human rights organizations, specifically targeting those that gathered the voices of Ethiopians living abroad.

One reason for blocking these online spaces can be attributed to the composition of the Ethiopian diaspora and to the ability of the discourses it articulates to reach beyond the digital media. Similar to other national groups that migrated from the Horn, Ethiopians living abroad represent a large and powerful force that have historically been involved in wars and politics back home.

But, in sharp contrast to the cases of Eritrea and Somaliland (see below), the great majority of politically-minded Ethiopians in the diaspora have opposed the political agenda of the incumbent government led by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Many attacks on the government in online spaces such as Nazret.com or Ethiopianreview.com, two popular websites blocked in Ethiopia, attack the very core of the EPRDF national project, refusing to recognize the current government as either legitimate or as the expression of the people's will. It is not uncommon to find a blog post labelling the prime minister as "crime minister" or describing the government as a dictatorship led by an ethnic minority group. On the other hand, pro-government websites—and on some occasions Prime Minister Zenawi himself—have responded by accusing opponents of chauvinism and of encouraging tensions within multi-ethnic Ethiopia similar to those that led to the Rwandan genocide in 1994.

This vehemence and polarization are not exclusive to online spaces and are evident in the long history of engagement—or lack of engagement—between the EPRDF on one hand, and other political forces in Ethiopia and the diaspora on the other. Since coming to power, the EPRDF has chosen not to negotiate with its adversaries, preferring to expand its influence and presence on the ground by delivering progress rather than enlarging its base by incorporating new forces and perspectives. This strategy has been applied to both old and new media. After coming to power, in response to internal and external pressures, the EPRDF allowed for unprecedented levels of freedom of expression, but they did not develop a strategy for reconciling or negotiating with the forces that were defeated or marginalized. As in Eritrea, the ruling elite is not well disposed to compromise.

As a result, journalists who were fired from the Ministry of Information and sympathized with those opposed to the EPRDF were given the opportunity to set up independent newspapers and use them as platforms for criticizing the government. The decision of the EPRDF to ignore these voices, or attack them without engaging with their arguments, exacerbated the polarization over time. A few years later, when the first websites were created for an Ethiopian audience, the EPRDF took a similar approach and largely ignored them.

The divide between pro- and anti-government forces has widened over time, having consequences in the aftermath of the elections in 2005 when the EPRDF reacted to its substantial electoral losses by imprisoning opponents and firing on demonstrators. Prominent journalists were arrested, their papers closed, and, the following year, blogs were also blocked to silence all alternative voices. As a result, both old and new media in Ethiopia now carry pro-government information or criticism that can be easily managed by the ruling elite

and does not challenge its fundamental political goals of retaining power and reinforcing its vision of ethnic federalism.

III.3 Somalia and Somaliland

The role of the diaspora in developing and shaping the digital media in Somalia and Somaliland shares many characteristics with Ethiopia and Eritrea, but has been even more significant in national politics. Somali-language websites have proliferated rapidly in recent years and most clans or political factions have developed their own platforms (two of the most popular are Hiiraan.com and Haatuf.net). This growth in the media sector has been important because domestic politics are dominated by the diaspora. In 2011, for example, diaspora members comprised 16 of the 18 ministers of the TFG.

Diaspora politicians are also among the few with the funding and technical expertise to set up radio stations in South-Central Somalia, often making the media active participants in the conflict. Though most of the websites are registered and hosted in Europe or North America, the news sites are able to get stories from inside Somalia through a network of informants or relatives acting as "journalists." Although these spaces are largely populated by members of the diaspora, they do influence opinions back home. The information carried on websites is often repeated by newspapers and other offline media outlets in Somalia and Somaliland.

One of the most striking developments of the last 10 years has been the remarkable proliferation of telecoms companies in Somalia offering inexpensive and high-quality services. This development is closely connected to the involvement of the diaspora and the remittance business. Diaspora remittances are the primary source of income for both Somaliland and South-Central Somalia, and the major communications companies have been driven to innovate to provide the best service possible for their customers, which includes having the widest reach and network. These are companies such as Somaliland's Dahabshiil, a multi-million-dollar enterprise with offices in more than 40 countries around the world.[13] These businesses, reliant on trust and deeply intertwined with national and diasporic social relations, have thrived.

The proliferation of telecoms has been facilitated by the lack of a central government able to regulate the industry, thus allowing telecom companies the opportunity to operate throughout Somalia at will. Within the limits set by the general insecurity prevailing in Somalia, telecoms are often seen as paving the way for the development of a business sector in Somalia. While most of these companies are owned and operated by members of the diaspora, the telecoms revolution has, at the same time, transformed the ability of Somalis to connect with those living abroad and to build bridges between diaspora communities and Somalis at home.

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13.   See http://www.dahabshiil.us/.

IV. Hybrid Media

The limited penetration of digital media in the Horn of Africa should not obscure their broader impact on existing media and channels of communication. Messages originating online show a remarkable ability to reach well beyond the population that has access to the internet. For example, a message on a forum or a blog can be picked up on newspapers, broadcast on radio and later discussed in coffee shops. This is particularly the case at critical moments, such as during elections or conflicts, when there is greater thirst for a plurality of voices and particular attention to what influential figures in the diaspora have to say. Similarly, some of the newest technologies have been reshaped by local agents to fit indigenous realities and political agenda.

The implications of digital innovation cannot be fully understood without considering these forms of hybrid media, emerging either as combinations of old and new media through which information is collected, interpreted, and disseminated, or as entirely new artefacts incorporating the unique needs, habits, and practices of a specific community.

Cases of the first type of hybrid media can be found in the close interconnection between diaspora online spaces and the printed press in Ethiopia and Somaliland. Especially before the Ethiopian elections of 2005, it was common for opposition newspapers to republish entire blog posts which had appeared on platforms such as Nazret.com, Ethiomedia.com or Ethiopianreview.com. Similarly in Somalia and Somaliland, hybrid media have had a central role in information flows. Just as in Ethiopia, blog posts are often taken from websites and printed in newspapers published in Hargeisa, Somaliland's capital. Some of these articles, especially those that are considered less controversial, are then read out during the evening state-run radio news bulletin, which encourages discussion and debate in teashops and buses.

Newer media also intersect with older modes of communication that may be perceived as more trusted, as is the case with poetry, which is considered by Somalis to be one of the most important means for expression and political mobilization. During the Somali National Movement (SNM) struggle in the 1980s and early 1990s, poetry was seen as having a crucial role in mobilizing the population; nowadays it is used in online spaces as a means to frame the grievances and hopes of Somalis inside and outside Somalia. As noted by a veteran of the SNM from Somaliland, poetry was often read over the radio during the struggle, when it was

more effective than anything else. It mobilized people. Poetry plays a big role as a means of communication with the public. Many listen to it only once and keep it by heart. I can't do that but a lot of people do … this is an oral society. They just pick it up. Instead of a very long lecture or an article, a poem would be more effective than an ordinary talk or a speech by a politician.[14]

Poets themselves are also highly influential. They have held, and to some degree continue to hold, prominent positions in the political space. Regarded as intellectuals, they are considered to have the ability to interpret and convey the urgency and importance of current events.

Cases of the second type of hybrid media are evident in the unique systems that have been developed by the Ethiopian government to communicate with the lower and outer reaches of the state administration and with Ethiopian citizens. Known as Woredanet and Schoolnet, these systems became partly operational in 2004, on the basis of strong support from the government, while frustrating the donors that were trying to promote the agenda of "ICT for development."[15] Woredanet and Schoolnet are examples of how digital media can become a vehicle for power to be exercised from the state center to the periphery, reiterating key messages to progressively lower tiers of government and reaching wide sections of the society—even if technical hitches and bandwidth limits often prevent these platforms from reaching their potential.

Woredanet, which stands for "Network of district administrations," employs the same protocol the internet is based on, as well as satellite communications, to allow ministers, civil servants, and trainers in the capital to videoconference with the 11 regional and 550 district administrations and instruct local officials on what they should be doing and how. As an indication of the sensitivity of the project, the servers necessary to manage videoconferencing are installed in the office of the prime minister.

Schoolnet uses a similar architecture to broadcast pre-recorded classes in a variety of subjects, from mathematics to civic education, to all secondary schools in the country. It has also been used to broadcast messages from the political leadership in Addis Ababa to selected groups of individuals, such as teachers living in the remote areas of the country. By the end of 2011, more than one thousand schools were connected and almost 20,000 plasma TV screens had been installed by this massive project.

Woredanet and Schoolnet have increased the presence of the state on the ground, as a political entity and also as a service provider. Schoolnet has ensured that every secondary-school student in the country has access to educational material of the same quality, thus reducing the urban–rural divide in education, but has also

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14. Interview in Hargeisa, Somaliland, 24 March 2006.

15. In the late 1990s and early 2000s the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), headquartered in Addis Ababa, embarked on an ambitious plan to employ ICTs to support economic development and democratic participation in Africa. An African Information Society Initiative (AISI) was launched to coordinate these efforts across Africa, promoting ideas such as the free flow of information and the liberalization of the ICT market, proposals that the Ethiopian government strongly resisted. Other agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank tried to promote a less centralized use of ICTs, sponsoring programmes facilitating access to the internet in schools and the development of an ICT policy, but their efforts had little impact on the government's strategy of using ICTs to support its own political agenda.

been broadcasting sensitive political content through civic education, thus marginalizing the role of teachers. They have equipped remote areas of the state with the latest technologies, but not to empower individuals to find solutions to their problems independently, for example through accessing the internet. Rather, they leave audiences no choice but to access content produced at the center. Woredanet has also aimed to re-create some of the communicative practices that the political leadership developed during the guerrilla struggle; for example, by employing the tele-presence of videoconferencing to make sure that the vanguard connects with the local nodes of the political structure, receiving feedback and—above all—imparting orders.

As a result of Woredanet and Schoolnet, many Ethiopians—especially civil servants, educators and pupils—can claim to have been affected by the diffusion of digital media, but in a form that does not easily compare with the experience of most users in other countries. The uniqueness of these systems seems to have reduced the ability of advocacy groups to grasp the magnitude of Woredanet and Schoolnet. While the government has been heavily criticized by organizations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists or Reporters without Borders for censoring political blogs, little criticism has been directed at Schoolnet and Woredanet. Donor agencies with a history of engagement in Ethiopia have expressed disapproval of the ways in which ICTs have been reshaped to fit the government's national agenda, but they have often done so privately or by withdrawing support for ICT projects.

The emergence of these new forms of hybrid media calls for new frameworks of analysis that are able to examine how new communication technologies can be reshaped in ways that are highly localized and affect flows of information and political participation, but beyond the acts of censorship that are commonly registered by advocacy groups and international organizations.

V. Conclusion: New Networks

Digital media in the Horn of Africa are constantly evolving and being reshaped by governments, industry, and citizens in innovative and unpredictable ways. There are several factors that hold the promise of further transformations in both the online and offline spaces. Some of the potential for further change lies in the emergence of a new generation of citizens who are increasingly disconnected from the elite and partisan politics that have been at the heart of the conflicts affecting their countries.

Both in the diaspora and at home, this younger generation, often inhabiting and expressing itself in social media, embraces forms of change that do not necessarily follow the prevailing divides (for example, the deep polarization between elites in Ethiopia who aspire to the "rights of nations and nationalities" and those who lament what they see as the loss of a unified Ethiopia). Embracing more universal values, and being less affected by war's legacy of deep-rooted grievances or the bitterness of losing power, these individuals often appear to seek a new—and desperately needed—middle ground.

A more tangible change that can affect the Horn is the availability of faster and less expensive connections facilitated by the East African Submarine Cable System, or EASSy, a fiber-optic cable connecting eastern Africa to the rest of the world.[16] EASSy has started to affect the diffusion of digital media in countries such as Kenya, bringing down prices and increasing opportunities to connect to the internet. Unfortunately, violent conflict and politics have prevented most countries in the Horn from exploiting this readily available opportunity. The Eritrean government has so far refused to connect to the cable. Connections are ready in both Somalia and Somaliland, but security concerns and conflicts among the operators that are supposed to manage the system have so far prevented the service from becoming operational.[17] The Ethiopian government,

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16. EASSy is the result of a partnership among African and international shareholders aimed at providing fast connectivity to the region; 92 percent of the consortium is made up of African companies, mostly telecoms, and parallel projects have been initiated to lay terrestrial cable systems to connect EASSy to landlocked countries such as Ethiopia and Uganda. More information about EASSy can be found on the consortium's website (http://www.eassy.org/index-2.html) and on the website of the Western Indian Ocean Cable Co. (WIOCC), which is EASSy's major shareholder (http://www.wiocc.net/).

17. In 2010, the government of Somaliland revoked Dalkom Somalia's licence to operate the cable, claiming it had already signed an agreement with another company, SomCable. Dalkom Somalia is a company registered in Somalia. However, the right of SomCable to operate the system has been questioned and it is likely that the Somaliland government will launch a new tender that it is hoped will adjudicate the right to operate the cable in a more transparent way.

as in the past, has promised its citizens affordable and fast connections while moving only very slowly towards achieving these goals (for fear of losing its grip on power).

Despite these structural obstacles to EASSy, the system's availability creates strong incentives for both public and private actors to make some use of it as a resource. In the medium term, EASSy might encourage governments to re-evaluate their policies, and to try to balance their attempts to retain power with the realities of an expanding online population. Most recently, countries such as Ethiopia have been looking to the experience of China, which is regarded as sharing closer economic and political objectives than countries in the West.[18]

The Horn of Africa appears to be at a critical juncture with regard to digital media. The expanding opportunities offered by the diffusion of mobile devices as well as the increasing affordability of broadband are making it progressively more difficult for governments to restrict access. At the same time, countries such as Ethiopia and Eritrea have had numerous opportunities to shape public opinion and repress dissent. In the coming years the Horn is likely to experience an intensifying struggle between two models of digital media diffusion: one that reconciles development with control, following the example of countries such as China, and another, more open model that enables digital media to be used to support new forms of political mobilization, even when this may increase existing tensions within society.

18. For example, in 2006 the Chinese telecoms giant ZTE won a bid of US$ 1.5 billion to overhaul Ethiopia's telecoms system. Similar Chinese interventions in the media and telecoms sectors are increasing elsewhere in the region. Kenya is becoming a hub for China's public and private enterprises to innovate, as exemplified by the partnership between Xinhua, China's news agency, Huawei, China's largest telecoms company, and Safaricom, Kenya's leading mobile operator, to provide news on Kenyans' mobile phones across the country. Somalia and Eritrea, however, have not yet been principal targets of Chinese investment in telecoms and media.

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