

Mass Media in Today's Ethiopia: Threat or Opportunity?

Sociologically speaking, one of the most powerful social institutions in modern society is media. It affects and defines societies' culture, family structure, politics, history, religion, identity, and normative orders. Of its various forms, these two centuries can provide us with clear and relevant research, testimonies, pieces of evidence, and experiences showing the undisputed role that is being played by mass media. Broadly encompassing newspapers, radios, televisions and others, mass media continues to unpack its unsettling shock waves day in, day out. Of these, again, the role of television is much more important than others, simply because it promises to offer no platform for interaction. On top of this, motion pictures coupled with sounds, compared to other means of communication, make television a power weapon for good use or misuse. One of the rarely diagnosed effects of mass media is its negative consequence in the form of mass hypnosis. Although, arguably, this could potentially produce a positive functional outcome to those who control the media (that is, the state, political, religious, or economic-based interest groups), approached from the consumers' perspective, the effect would be much less helpful and attractive. As its purposely induced intervention, hypnosis entails a state of human consciousness drawing its existential energy from human being's focused attention and controlled-reduction of environmental awareness. This way, hypnosis serves to exploit human beings' susceptibility to responses to presented stimuli (in our case mass media materials such as political, economic, and/or religious).

Ethiopia: Media, Politics, and Religion

Ethiopia has been, for quite some time, struck by the meagerness of mass media alternatives. The public sphere only entertained the Ethiopian Radio and Television broadcasts, state-owned media outlets. This was accompanied by state and privately-owned newspapers and magazines, the number of which, though, remains highly unreliable. There is a good reason underpinning this. Whenever some sort of public outcry causes inconvenience to the status quo, experiences and testimonies show, the quantity of privately run newspapers and magazines go south. Drawing from global experiences, we may claim that the presence of some degree of democracy ushers an increase in the relative fertile ground for alternative voices. Unfortunately, this rarely happens in Ethiopia.

Probably since the first-half of EPRDF's (Ethiopian Peoples Republic Democratic Front) a quarter of a century plus rule, a new trend is emerging in Ethiopia. The number of so-called "privately-owned" radios and TV stations reached an all-time high in the country. As of 2017, there were ten public radio stations, six globally transmitted public television stations, and nine public satellite television stations. On the other hand, there were ten private radio stations (the lion's share is taken by Fana Broadcasting Corporation, FBC, a semi-governmental media conglomerate, and other pro-government radio stations, such as Zami Public Connection, Zami FM), and many other community-based regional radio stations (which are, again, mostly pro-government). Similarly, the number of public (government aligned) magazines and newspapers outnumber privately run magazines and newspapers. This Linnaeus University's (Fojo Media Institute) 2017 report, however, ignores more than a dozen of other privately-owned satellite TV channels exclusively addressing Ethiopians, both at home and abroad[1].

For the sake of convenience, we may classify these outlets (Radios and TVs) into three: which we may style as "entertainment" only, "mainly entertainment, but partly informative", and religious. The first group of media outlets strictly air entertainment programs. They focus on music, films, stand-up comedies, drama series, entertainment-oriented talk shows ("showbiz"), competitive shows and games, cultural and art-focused interviews, and etc. None of them, however, run the risk of being caught in touching socioeconomic, political, and religious issues (and crisis) threatening Ethiopia. The best examples would be the increasingly worrisome Kana TV channel (for its manly foreign cultural production-dependence) and others, such as EBS, JTV, LTV, and Nahoo TV.

Arguably, almost all radio (FM) stations either work to serve the state or exclusively focus on "entertaining" the youth age-group in the country. Perhaps an exception to this would be Sheger 102.1. FM radio station, for, it can be claimed, its unflinching propensity to engage "Ethiopia" through dealing with historical, cultural, and identity-related issues via passive, and sometimes relatively critical, tones. This makes Sheger FM radio station an example of entertainment-cum-informative media outlets in the recently evolving media landscape of the country. Another media outlet that, to some extent, appears to have a critical stand vis-à-vis the politico-economic currents challenging Ethiopia is ENN TV. However, it remains to be seen whether ENN continues to do whatever it does, as there are rumors accusing it of being

affiliated with the existing ruling party (EPRDF).

The third group of media outlets that are currently competing to win Ethiopian audiences, particularly the faithful ones, consists of religious-based satellite TV channels. This actually makes sense due to the fact that Ethiopia is considered one of the most religious countries in the world[2]. Also, it goes without saying that Ethiopia was one of the few oldest nations in the world to accommodate today's dominant monotheistic religions at their earliest times, both Christianity and Islam. Yet, although the majority of Ethiopians are either Orthodox Christians or Sunni Muslims, the recently booming satellite evangelism tells another story. According to one rough estimation, there are about 15-20 satellite television channels specifically targeting the followers of different variants of Protestantism in Ethiopia[3]. While, according to state statistics (not to mention being highly questioned for its alleged "distortion" in matters of religion and ethnic composition) in 2007, an approximately 40% of the population was designated as Orthodox Christians and about 34% as Muslims, the Protestants (Pentecostal and Evangelical) were less than 20% of the population. In other words, there is an increasingly visible disparity in the ratio between the population and religious-based TV channel distribution in the country. Whilst the Protestants have access to 15-20 (or more) religious TV channels, Muslims and Orthodox Christians have, so far, only a total of three TV channels, two for the Muslims (Africa and Zaway TV) and one for the Orthodox Christians (EOTC TV) channels.

Even worse, it can be claimed that the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) would not have launched its EOTC TV at all if it had not been for the danger that the staggeringly increasing Protestant-affiliated TV channels posed to its followers. Before the launch of EOTC TV, the Holy Synod of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was frustrated by "the declining number of faithful" orthodox Christians in Ethiopia and the threat posed by "growing evangelical movements in the country"[4]. In fact, the EOC's "His Holiness Abune Mathias – Patriarch of Ethiopia said the church cannot keep losing her faithful . . . a considerable number of faithful to Evangelical and Pentecostal movements in the country"[5]. Consequently, as a measure, by allocating about 12 million Ethiopian birr, the EOTC hoped "to tackle the problem of losing Orthodox faithful to various Protestant and Evangelical denominations" through EOTC TV[6].

The recent visibility of Protestantism (the religious propagation through TV channels) in Ethiopia can mean anything. But I will mention two probable causal factors. One explanation would be that religious-based mass media outlets, particularly protestant affiliated ones, increased sharply in the post-Meles Zenawi Ethiopia. One may argue that the deposed prime minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, being a Protestant himself, might have turned a blind eye to the advent and growth of evangelical activities of Protestants in Ethiopia. We do not have any sort of evidence to support the claim that he had actually supported any of this, but we know, factually, that the degree of passivity and reluctance shown to Protestantism hardly observed when it comes to Orthodox Christianity and Islam in Ethiopia. Quite to the contrary, Muslims were (and still are in some ways) protesting against what they considered state intervention in matters of Islamic creed (Ahabash) and religious affairs (election of council members). Under the banner of terrorism and extremism, massive incarceration and violation of human rights were the track records of the state, for quite some time now. Similarly, the interference of the state in matters of religious affairs also accounts for the disintegration of the EOTC, one based in Ethiopia and another one in the West (North America). However, we cannot be sure whether the currently popular and protestant Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Dr. Abiy Ahmed, will do anything about (for or against) this. Taking power in the chaotic moments of the country a few months ago, it would be too early to predict what he will and will not do shortly.

The second probable explanation would be that unlike the two, Protestant missionary activities might have increased sharply, coupled with favorable political climate at home, due to massive funding from abroad. Catholics and Protestants have always undertaken missionary activities in the different parts of Ethiopia . . . are self-evident. In other words, apart from running faith-based schools and NGOs, we see the proliferation of churches (unlike those of the EOTC, very small and house-like) and now satellite television channels. Increasingly, their community outreach programs are becoming more and more open, often carried out in stadiums and open spaces. Yet, except for the schools and NGOs, Catholic missionary activities are not, for obvious reasons, as bold and massive in scale as Protestants in Ethiopia. Meaning, since the number of Catholics in Ethiopia, compared to all the others, is very insignificant; it would appear less of a practical move to launch satellite TV channels. Accordingly, it is the interaction of these local and international factors that paved the way for the rapid increase in faith-based TV channels, especially of the Protestants in Ethiopia.

Now, what can we take from this? Obviously, one would be that the proliferation of entertainment-only mass media outlets can play an important latent role. Although the manifest function of these outlets is a

crystal-clear reality, enjoyment, and entertainment, we cannot simply underestimate the possibility of latent (even unintended) function. This could be related to mass hypnosis and can sometimes function as a tool of attention diversion in the face of unpredictability and crisis. Put differently, Ethiopia has lately become unstable given claims of economic insecurity, regional imbalance, unjust resource distribution, unemployment, emigration, and others. The expansion of entertainment-based TV channels and radio stations can, thus, function to dumping down the productive age-group, making it busy with emotions, feelings, daydreaming, and imaginations. Although, again, there are some seeds of hope with the advent of Dr. Abiy, the impact these outlets leave will definitely be immense and unforgiving. Changes, reformative or transformative or both, are needed to help facilitate the inclusion and scaling up of media outlets that counterbalance state-owned ones. Finally, changes are also needed to be directed at foreign aids which are channeled through faith-based NGOs and now increasingly working to scale up televangelism. As poverty and food insecurity are serious causes of concern, the government may push hard for more of development-driven engagement, not just simply God's words through TVs, but also encouraging God's acts, of easing the actual lives of the faithful.

Resources

- [1] <https://fojo.se/images/documents/Etiopien/Annex-2-Ethiopian-Media-Mapping-2017.pdf>
- [2] <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/maps-and-graphics/most-religious-countries-in-the-world>
- [3] <http://en.satexpat.com/tv/ethiopia>
- [4] <http://theorthodoxchurch.info/blog/news/ethiopian-orthodox-church-to-launch-24-hour-tv-channel-to-educate-faithful>
- [5] <http://theorthodoxchurch.info/blog/news/ethiopian-orthodox-church-to-address-declining-number-of-faithful>
- [6] <http://theorthodoxchurch.info/blog/news/ethiopian-orthodox-church-to-launch-24-hour-tv-channel-to-educate-faithful>