Social media and journalism in Ethiopia – Setting the scene for reform

A report by Christer L. Pettersson and Nigussu Solomon

FOJO: MEDIA INSTITUTE
Linnaeus University
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- Setting the scene for reform

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Quote from this report
April 2019

This mapping of social media in Ethiopia should read as a complement to a broad media study conducted by Fojo Media Institute in 2017: "A feasibility Study - Strengthening free, independent and professional journalism in Ethiopia".

The report, with a journalism and freedom of speech perspective, serves as a discussion document and should be seen as an introduction to the many issues and aspects how social media influences sustainable, independent news publishing, freedom of speech and growth of democracy in Ethiopia. This against the backdrop of an intensified international debate and actions taken across the world to come to terms with social media platforms including the use of them by undisclosed political forces.

Christer L. Pettersson has prepared this report for Fojo Media Institute, Sweden with the assistance of Nigussu Solomon, in collaboration with Nubia Media and Communications Plc, Ethiopia.

Photographer Michael Tewelde has taken the photos in the report, most of them during the conference "Promoting journalism and democracy in Practices - Media reform in a time of change", 9-10 April at UNECA, Addis Ababa.
Introduction

Several years of pro-democracy unrest and demonstrations, including mobilisation and communication via social media, led to widespread changes in Ethiopia in the beginning of 2018. Hundreds of political prisoners, journalists and opposition bloggers in Ethiopia were released, the then Prime Minister Desalegn resigned in February 2018, the reform-minded new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed was appointed in April and the Government unbanned hundreds of websites in May and June. Opposition politicians and bloggers were invited to come home as terrorism charges and long prison sentences were dropped. The media was told they could come out of hiding and express themselves freely.

Social media is the dark horse. Social media has, in a few years, turned the political landscape in Ethiopia on its head not only as a means of mobilising people, but also as a means of spreading rumours, hate speech and disinformation.

The government has traditionally/previously primarily dealt with demonstrations, disturbances and factional fighting by breaking them up, often with the use of excessive force, or by shutting down the internet for hours, days or even weeks.

Government officials, who now say they are prepared to find common ground, have invited the opposition and the media - some released from jail and others who have returned from exile - to jointly chart a way forward. Now they are also taking international advice on how to become more transparent in their communication and kickstart democracy.

There is however more to it than dealing with political power struggle where ethnic affiliation is used. What ultimately is happening is that digital media has made a more invasive, ultimately personalised form of marketing possible, which is changing political and commercial communication as a whole and with it the media landscape. As The New Republic has put it: "Instead of having to cast a wide net in searching for potential customers, advertisers now could know every intimate detail about those customers beforehand. They began targeting people geographically and behaviourally, based on common interests or things they liked in social media or what they wrote in emails to friends. The surveillance economy was born." ¹

As discussed further below, a number of core problem areas for social media emanate out of the digital technology shift and the emergence of social media that stakeholders need to deal with now and in the future. Among them are:

- Broadening access to the internet
- Regulation: publishing responsibility, freedom of speech and democracy
- Consumer protection: data privacy, disclosure of platform data handling and advertising
- Copyright of inventions and content
- Overall media finance when advertising revenues are migrating to primarily Facebook and Google (incl Youtube).
- Media literacy in the light of hate speech, disinformation and a completely new range of disruptive, conniving marketing that with it carries both great opportunities and massive losses.

Social media reach in Ethiopia

Social media in Ethiopia is essentially synonymous with Facebook, which commands 84% of social media users (Feb 2019). Other players are Google’s YouTube, Facebook-owned Instagram, messaging services Telegram and Facebook-owned WhatsApp. (Graph on social media - not including messaging apps - from StatCounter)

Ethiopia had the second largest relative growth of social media in the world in 2018 (see graph below) which translates to the 16th largest absolute growth in the world and the third largest absolute growth in Africa after the giants Nigeria and South Africa.² Out of the 68.34 million Ethiopians in 2018 that have mobile connectivity - a massive increase from 53.3 million in 2017 - only 5.6 million (in Jan 2019) are active users of social media, which nevertheless is a significant increase from 3.8 million in 2017. The low penetration is mainly because broadband costs are, although significantly decreased in 2018,³ high and there is no competition: state-owned Ethio Telecom controls all telecommunication activities, be it landlines, mobiles or fixed and mobile internet - of which fixed internet speed has improved significantly, 27%, in 2018.⁴ The sizable Ethiopian diaspora, mostly in the US and Europe - estimates vary between 1 to 2 million people⁵ - has significant influence on social media and is not restrained by the cost and speed of broadband or political restraints.

⁴ a.a
Ethiopia had the 2nd fastest relative growth of social media in the world in 2018.  
Source: Hootsuite/Wearesocial

Online media - stakeholders

The principal stakeholders in the social media market are the platform providers who are accumulating data for sale to advertisers and intelligence gatherers (or as an investment for future use); registered users/audiences who are accepting to give away their data and are providing content; professional content providers such as news media and bloggers; advertisers who are diverting their funds from analogue platforms to reach ever growing, captive audiences; and infrastructure suppliers and regulators.

Of particular interest when mapping the social media landscape is to look at how legacy media (newspapers, radio or television) are dealing with social media platforms:

- how legacy media are affected by unfiltered content editorially (in the sense that it is not edited by journalists but by algorithms or potentially hidden policy makers) and
- how social media data capture and advertising revenue capture play out in the Ethiopian market.

News Media

News media primarily reach city populations and the large cash-flush diaspora. Audiences online are to a larger degree Ethiopians in the diaspora and tend to be in the 18-35 age brackets. By and large, online news media are growing steadily but are at this stage not making any money from online publishing, neither on their own websites nor in social media.
There is a fair amount of hope, albeit with some healthy scepticism, among the news media that the government is serious about its liberalisation policy. Lack of transparency continues to be an issue and news media are mostly kept in the dark about sudden closures.

Printed newspapers are still leading the way in Addis Ababa. Photo: Michael Tewelde.

Newspapers

- Newspapers have very limited print run and are all printed by Berhanena Selam, owned by the state.
- The Ethiopian Reporter, with 6 000 in normal weekly circulation, has the largest circulation among the newspapers.
- Distribution is limited to Addis Ababa and a few large cities.
- Media houses only print a few copies as the cost is high and the market is limited.
- The cost of a newspaper is too expensive for the vast majority of people. It is common to rent a newspaper per minute or hour rather than to buy it.
- In order not to get print runs delayed or confiscated by censorship - or worse, end up in jail - self-censorship has been necessary.
- Only state newspapers such as Addis Zemen and Ethiopian Herald are supported by government advertising.
- Privately held newspapers mainly get their advertising from the private sector.
- There is a notion that to attract commercial advertising it has, certainly until now, been necessary to have editorial content that advertisers felt was government approved - as they otherwise could be penalised by the government.
- Some of the newspapers appear to have a very healthy flow of adverts.
• All newspapers have at least a rudimentary internet presence with free access.
• Social media is primarily used to promote print content.
• Access to premium online content is in some cases linked to subscription of print editions.
• Publishers have not (yet) introduced mixed subscriber models, e.g. with optional payment for subscription or membership The Guardian style (those who can afford pay for those who not can afford).
• Only one or two of the interviewed print media had a revenue generation strategy for digital, e.g. to ring-fence classifieds and market them separately.
• All print media however see a surge among users online. A business paper, Ethiopian Business Review, has grown its Facebook presence from 6 500 to 17 100 followers during the past 12 months.
• Much of social media content tends to be geared towards the 15-35-year age group.
• There are new digital marketplaces operated by emerging digital media owners with sales of goods, services and property, primarily via the social messaging app Telegram, but also Facebook groups and WhatsApp.
• Online business is below the government radar. Market research is needed to better understand this segment.

The exhibition Fake ≠ Fact info lab was highly praised by participants at the "Promoting journalism and democracy in Practices - Media reform in a time of change" conference 9-10 April at UNECA, Addis Ababa.
Viewpoint:

- Newsprint media is geared towards earning revenue from advertising (until the day they cannot). Except for having a webpage and a social media presence, print media houses have no incentive, for now, nor margins, to transfer to digital publishing.
- Many editors fear the worst when it comes to hate speech on social media but are not concerned with regards to their own business. They are not under attack and are not responding to trolling.
- There is a great worry that extreme forces can use social media to ignite conflict, in particular in rural areas, between political, ethnic and religious groups, based on propaganda, lies, hate speech and hearsay. Editors say they do their best to defuse online hate and calls for violence. The situation is, on and off, they admit, very tense.
- All print publishers say they are not making money from social media. For the time being, they are using social media as a marketing tool.
- There are many differing views on the state of the country’s print media. Some diaspora segments would say they are too nervous, low quality, and are only publishing positive stories about the government. Others would add the media is simply brow beaten: many editors and journalists have had enough of being targeted in person, they have been imprisoned and have after all stayed rather than go into exile.
- The result is nevertheless that print media has taken a knock in credibility. It has been hard for readers to know to what degree newspapers are just the voices of their masters.

Television stations

As a reminder, we are not assessing Ethiopian television stations on their broadcasting viewership data but are merely looking at some fragmented data about their social media presence and popularity.

The most important consideration for Ethiopian television stations at present, in terms of social media, is - just like with print media - to market their channels and to post content on YouTube (mainly targeting the diaspora which is cash flush and is not suffering from slow and irreverent broadband distribution).

The Ethiopian television market has taken major steps towards liberalisation in the past two years, with four stations broadcasting via satellite gaining proper broadcast licenses in March 2018.

The most popular of the broadcasters (Oct 2018), EBS and Kana, are almost entirely focusing on entertainment (foreign dubbed drama, soap operas and game shows) followed by the state broadcaster EBC, which by a 75 % growth in six months had the fastest growth in Facebook followers during the six months after the new Prime Minister announced liberalisations.

Online strategies are cautious and depend on the direction of business models, demography and audience support. Broadcasters with young and diaspora audiences are more active online and are uploading content on Facebook and YouTube. Advertising revenues from social media can only be earned from foreign accounts and is not accounted for.

The top three Ethiopian broadcasters in terms of Facebook following June-Nov 2018 (Graph from Socialbakers):
The leading television-social media players:

**Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation**, the state broadcaster, operates the only comprehensive news programs. It has faithfully followed the government’s agenda. The state broadcaster falls behind the newly established broadcasters at least in Facebook popularity. With political change in the air EBC, however, is significantly increasing its news viewership.  

**Kana**, which markets its dubbed soap operas and dramas on social media, is the leading online television channel in terms of followers. This is achieved by having eight out of the top ten television programs on the broadcast top chart. Kana specialises in imported dubbed soap operas and drama. Not surprisingly, Kana was the only station stating it was breaking even on social media among the television stations interviewed.

**ARTS TV**, a startup owned by the same group as the newspaper Reporter, focuses primarily on news, documentary and cultural content. The station, with a broad owner group from various professions, only started with social media in July 2018 and has 10 000 followers.

**Fana TV** rose out of the former liberation movement TPLF’s radio station in the jungle during the liberation struggle years. The company has operated with a radio license since 1991 and received a television license in 2017. The company is dubbing the CBS concept Survivor. The company’s shareholding is likely to be politicians and liberation struggle veterans.  

Other significant TV stations are, Walta TV and **Nahoo TV**, broadcasting in Amharic and **JTV**, owned by a popular musician with his own very popular tv-show.  

Previously banned satellite television stations ESAT and OMN are also likely to make inroads but are not among the top contenders in the television social media statistical charts.
Digital media

YouTube channels
There are a number of YouTube channels mostly focusing on entertainment but also news. The largest, Diretube.com, is also the largest Ethiopian social media channel with 2.9 million followers and the only purely online company in Ethiopia that states it is profitable.

Diretube says it only publishes content it has rights to publish - while many other channels are said to be less scrupulous. The company says it has been affected by identity theft many times. Back in 2013 a copycat site published the news that a well-known politician had died, although he had not. This caused serious disruption for Diretube.

Diretube is a multi-channel network content manager with a YouTube certified team. The company produces its own news content and has plans to start streaming of content.

Bloggers
Social media bloggers and commentators - many of them journalists posting their articles and messages from abroad - have played a crucial role in fomenting recent years’ anti-government protests. Even more so as much of the media, held back by having to print on the one-and-only government printing facility, had to obey by harsh security and anti-terrorist laws.

More than a dozen Ethiopian bloggers have become legendary for being outspoken when the mainstream media could not and hence for the role, they (many of them well known journalists) have played in mobilising the opposition to the government since 2013.
One leading blogger has spent nine years in prison. Others have spent time in prison and been harassed, as has Zone 9 bloggers Abel Wabella, Atnaf Berhane, Mahlet Fantahun, Natnael Feleke, Zelalem Kibret, and Befekadu Hailu.

The most prolific and controversial blogger in exile and now also at home is Jawar Mohammed who runs Oromia Media Network with 738 000 followers (while his own Facebook page has 1.5 million follower). He landed back on home soil in August 2018 after having been given amnesty.

Online news media

Online news media, besides bloggers, have not yet taken off in revenue terms. Addis Standard, which suspended its hard copy print edition in October 2016 – as it became a casualty of the State of Emergency – is an exception. New start-ups are waiting in the wings, including NewBusinessEthiopia.com which publishes as a pro bono publication. Others are likely to follow, not the least diaspora publications that in some instances are better equipped financially and without being shackled by broadband limitations.
Diaspora consumers

Diaspora users represent about 25% of the Ethiopian digital audience. 50% are in the USA while the rest are spread across Europe and the Middle East. The Graph below, from an Oxford University/Addis Ababa social media report, shows the spread of the Ethiopian diaspora activity online two months before the elections 2016.  

![Graph: Mechachal, Oxford University/Addis Ababa University, 2017](image)

Broadband operators

State-owned Ethio Telecom is the only broadband player in the Ethiopian data distribution market.

Social media and messaging companies

The leading internet tech and social media companies, Facebook and Google, do not have any formal representation in Ethiopia. The same goes for Facebook owned Instagram and WhatsApp as well as Google-owned YouTube. Unusually, the most commonly used messaging app is Telegram.

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Social media has mobilised people but has also caused harm by spreading rumours, hate speech and disinformation. Photo: Michael Tewelde.

Facebook covers the region from Johannesburg while Google has its nearest office in Nairobi. Facebook is the by far largest social media platform in Ethiopia. Although Facebook does not have any representation in Ethiopia, it is still popular where 84% of the 6.1 million Ethiopians (users of the .et domain) who are accessing social media use Facebook. This means that the company commands unchallenged data about individual Ethiopian consumers - be it their online interests and habits, and for that matter political preferences - which the company can use to sell ads.

Facebook does not offer its Free Basics internet package in Ethiopia. We have tried to get feedback from Facebook, but it is still unclear why the company have not entered Ethiopia officially. One suggestion is simply that Ethio Telecom rejected it under the circumstances. There is little clarity at this point what Facebook had to gain from not releasing policy statements on the Ethiopian social media situation - which has been inflamed for the past five years with bloggers being jailed and troops sent out to stop demonstrations and unrest causing thousands of deaths.

The company has, however, in August 2018 as a reaction to the UN Human Rights Committee flagged that it is building a network of partners with independent and digital rights fact-checking outlets in a number of other countries: Sri Lanka, India, Cameroon, Central African Republic and Myanmar. "This new policy will be global", says one representative.7

Facebook’s efforts to bring the internet and more choice to people are laudable, but it’s unclear if that’s truly the goal. Facebook has a responsibility towards its investors and that is being served by getting more eyeballs on its site, to lure users.

WhatsApp

WhatsApp is by many analysts seen as a bigger problem than Facebook as its content is encrypted and therefore difficult to police (for hate speech, inciting violence, etc. as per Facebook’s own rules). Facebook’s plans to integrate its platforms including WhatsApp and Instagram is touted as a way to improve privacy but is seen as a way to stay ahead of regulators and strengthen its digital market dominance based on the very same personal data the company wants to make less available for external prying eyes.1

Telegram

The same goes for Telegram with more than 200 million users globally. Telegram is even less ‘controlled’ than WhatsApp in the sense that aggregated user data is, states the owners, not harvested for analytical or advertising sales purposes.

Telegram, which is the most commonly used messaging app in Ethiopia, is owned by two Russian brothers and is based in Dubai.

A good incentive to use Telegram is that it consumes half the amount of broadband that WhatsApp does - 49 MB versus WhatsApp 103 MB.

Telegram is open source and is more versatile as it can be custom-made. It is possible to create "super-groups" with up to 100 000 members, against WhatsApp’s maximum of 256 people, a clear advantage for political activism.

Primarily, in Ethiopia, it seems that Telegram is used, in addition to its social use, for sales. Traders and entrepreneurs use Telegram to market and pay for their goods and services.

Another incentive to use Telegram is that it allows for downloading software, videos and music illegally. Like Facebook’s Messenger, Telegram also operates payment services in other markets.

Online advertisers

Ethiopia’s advertising industry is regulated by the Proclamation on Advertisements from 2012 which generally takes a positive view on advertising as such but does not make any special provision for how to regulate online advertising. While online advertising is growing, e.g. in the lottery market, the size of the online ad market is unclear.

While Facebook and Google have gained control of about 57% of digital advertising globally9 (and with a significantly higher, and growing, share of mobile digital advertising10) - with strongly negative consequences for the financial viability of news media particularly on national and community levels - there are not yet any significant signs of the so-called duopoly having made any inroads in the Ethiopian media market.

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8 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/07/facebook-privacy-domination
Not many African countries, if any, actually deliver significant advertising revenue to Facebook - the company most likely operates at a loss, expecting to be in pole position at a time when a specific market in Africa acquires critical mass. An analysis by Caribou Digital suggests that all countries below the red line in the diagram below are loss makers for Facebook.\footnote{https://medium.com/caribou-digital/the-land-where-facebook-loses-money-d850c6593f70}

For the moment the global social media companies are probably only making some money from Ethiopian diaspora users as such users are logging on from U.S. IP-addresses and as there is miniscule digital advertising sales from within the country.

In other African markets the social media platforms calculation has been to invest in the future: to actively grow their user base (and harvest individual data) by building fibre, set up Wi-Fi hotspots but also to increase their offerings to payment services along the lines of China’s WeChat.

It is likely that the social media companies will follow the same route in Ethiopia by growing their user base in Ethiopia without reaping immediate gains. In countries with low GDP and low consumer purchasing power there is less significant ad revenue to chase which probably gives local news media breathing space (without having much of an upside).

Change can come very quickly, in particular if mobile broadband costs are significantly brought down. The Ethiopian market is one of the fastest growing in Africa. The country, with one of Africa's largest populations and with an incredibly low phone and data penetration, is deemed to be a potential boom market. Hence the country, with one of the largest populations in Africa, clearly is attractive for the likes of Facebook as it in the frontline to "bringing the next billion online".

The US Government Trade and Promotion Agency too considers it strategically important to gain access to the Ethiopian market.

\begin{figure}
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\includegraphics[width=\columnwidth]{graph.png}
\caption{Caribou Digital, 2017}
\end{figure}
The US Embassy in Nov 2018 sponsored “Ethiopia Hacks”, touted as the first hackathon program in the country aimed at supporting entrepreneurship, innovation and technology. Young entrepreneurs were challenged to identify prototype solutions for Ethiopia. Co-partners are the Google Developers Group in Addis and the Centre for Women’s Economic Environment.

As Facebook and Google are cross-subsidising their rollout in new markets with wholesome revenue from elsewhere the chances for local media - and for local social media companies with ad revenue models - to compete is slim.

The Government
The government controls the media market infrastructure by owning the only printer in the country able to print quality newsprint.
The government also owns the country’s only telecommunication provider, which has a monopoly on voice and data, landlines and mobile distribution.
The "public service broadcasters”, the national radio and leading TV news station are in all, but technical terms owned and controlled by government.
The government has said its intention is to let go of its political monopoly and has asked for assistance with media policy, including social media policy, from UNDP, Denmark, Sweden, UK and USA to draw up a reform plan.
The initiative has high priority. The Prime Minister himself is an IT professional and was responsible for setting up the very same INSA, the Information Network Security Agency, that he now needs to reign in and bring under democratic oversight.
The government confirms it is prepared to support media reforms aimed at reducing hatred and threats, contributing to the implementation and respect of transparency and freedom of expression.

Government officials state they would like to have an open dialogue on privacy and data issues - as part of a fight against hate speech via social media. This includes running its own communication in an open and professional manner, including not to troll.

A new press secretariat for the Prime Minister’s office was unveiled in November 2018. A new official twitter handle @PMEthiopia was also introduced. All government communication would also, reported Addis Standard, be channelled through various social media outlets.

Meanwhile the Government Communication Affairs Office (GCAO), officials reported, was cutting back thousands of staffers.
A priority for the government, in terms of communication and for the sake of transparency and levelling the playing field, would be to review and disclose its - in this case - social media practices going back to at least 2013.
The government’s surveillance strategies and practices, which are intertwined with social media, also would need a healthy dose of disclosure.

12 http://newbusinessethiopia.com/u-s-embassy-launches-ethiopia-hacks-program-to-promote-innovations/
Regulators

The Broadcasting Authority

The Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority (EBA), set up ten years ago, issues radio and television licenses. It has issued a wide range of new licenses in the past 1-2 years. The BA has been assigned by the government to drive the media reform process, including dealing with social media. The exact responsibilities and to what degree it is acceptable by the media industry and the opposition is unclear.

The ICT landscape

ICT contributes 2% to GDP which is half of East Africa’s average. The country’s Expansion Telephone Plan I (ETP I) aimed at providing telecom services to all Ethiopia’s rural villages - with Chinese companies ZTE and Huawei as well as Swedish Ericsson as suppliers - is in its final stage.

The next step, ETP II, aims at doubling telephone users from 50 to more than 100 million, although some observers say the real user figure is more likely 30 million as there are many duplicates and folded subscriptions. 4G services are at this stage only available in Addis Ababa, with 3G in larger cities and 2G in some rural areas.

State-owned Ethio Telecom has the monopoly over telecommunication and broadband. The Prime Minister has said in parliament that the state company will only offer shares for primarily local and diaspora companies and that no new licenses will be handed out. It has however been reported that an international partner may be invited to take a strategic stake in Ethio Telecom.
Media reports have singled out South Africa’s mobile phone companies Vodacom, MTN as well as Vietnam’s state-owned telecom Vietel as some of the parties interested in entering the Ethiopian market.

Ethiopia, with a projected 8% growth in 2018, according to the World Bank, is touted as Africa’s fastest growing market and with one of the continent’s largest populations, yet with relatively low ICT penetration.

The interest in investing in the Ethiopian market depends on:

- If there is a record of political stability.
- If there is enough transparency in bidding processes. Ethiopia hovers just above 100 among 189 countries in Transparency International’s perception ranking. It scores 35 out of 100 where 100 is completely clean.

Internet reach in Ethiopia and predictions

The government’s initiative in 2018 to lower the rates for data packages through Ethio Telecom has increased sales of consumer data contracts considerably. The rates are however still very high compared with e.g. Kenya – the upside is massive, if Ethiopia’s internet population was on par with Kenya, there would be 75 million Ethiopians online compared with today’s 17.87 million - and the beneficiaries are in specific areas in larger cities where there is embryonic access to broadband.
Befeqandu Haulu, Editor at Addis Maleda and former member of the blogger collective Zone 9; Soleyana Shimeles, lawyer, blogger (also Zone 9) and human rights activist; Berhan Taye, blogger and digital freedom activist. Photo: Michael Tewelde.

Legislation affecting social media

The range of media laws that also affect the internet and social media include:

- Ethiopia’s Constitution, including Article 26, which protects individuals’ rights, e.g. not to be spied on, and Article 29 which protects the right to freedom of expression and right to information. The same article enshrines freedom of the press, access to information and prohibition of censorship.
- The Anti-Terrorism Proclamation of 2009.
- A whole range of other laws that affect access to information and freedom of expression.
- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.

There is also a wealth of information for Ethiopia to pick up from international internet tech-industry related legislation.

The Government is planning to revise the Media law and the ATP law and are working on a law to curb hate speech. A draft has been developed and is currently presented to stakeholders.
Worldwide legislation and trends on data and social media

Internet tech companies and social media platforms remain widely unregulated. As a recent EU think tank report suggests "existing laws fall short in addressing the intricacies of technological systems. Without specific regulations and principles, the digital sphere is a regulatory "Wild West"."  

Africa

- South Africa introduced a new bill, The Cyber Crimes bill, in December 2018 that took cognizance of criticism of earlier versions for being too broad and open to abuse. Powers for State Security were removed as references to "fake news" while instead focusing on online fraud, hacking and e.g. "revenge porn". Another law, The Protection of Personal Information Act, protecting misuse of personal information, was enacted five years ago but with not enough resources for the Information Regulator to implement it forcefully. Another draft bill in the making, Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill, that makes hate speech a crime, is underway.

- Malawi implemented an electronic transaction and cyber security legislation in 2016 with broad provisions that critics say contradict the freedom of expression provisions in the Constitution.

- Mozambique introduced an electronic transactions act in 2017 which makes people posting online criminally accountable. The law - dealing with private use of e.g. Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram - has not been tested in the courts.

- Tanzania introduced the Electronic and Postal Communications (online content) regulations in 2018 with stipulations that blogs and online groups must register and pay a $930 licence fee, store contributors’ details, identify sources and disclose financial sponsors. The law is highly controversial in the freedom of speech community and was challenged in court.

- Angola introduced a five-in-one package of laws, Social Communication Legislative Package, ahead of elections 2017, with statutory regulation of online media and criminalisation. (There was no significant interference by the authorities during the elections.)

- The Zimbabwean government, which closed down the internet for 4 days in January as security forces attacked demonstrators leading to "at least 14 deaths, 600 victims of violence, torture or rape, and more than 1,000 arrests, is to repeal all media legislation, including the "infamous" Access to Information and protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Broadcasting services Act. AIPPA is to be replaced with four new bills: Media Commission Bill, Access to Information Bill, Broadcasting Services Amendment Bill and a Protection of Personal Information/Data bill.

- Benin was first off, the block to impose a tax on social media users but had second thoughts and cancelled it after local and international activists protested.

- Uganda imposed a widely criticised user tax on social media platforms in July 2018.

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17. It is worth noting that government-controlled Saturday Herald now calls this old draconian act "infamous", https://www.herald.co.zw/four-media-bills-on-the-cards/
Kenya has introduced the comprehensive Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Bill which covers a whole range of offences including cyber espionage, false publications, child pornography, publication of false information, and fraudulent use of electronic data the statement continues.\(^\text{19}\) The bill was met with warnings by Committee to Protect Journalists that it could criminalise free speech.

Zambia has introduced a levy on internet calls and too has a computer misuse and cybercrimes bill in the pipeline.

**European Union**

*Privacy rules.* The [General Data Protection Regulation](https://gdpr.uclouvain.be/) (GDPR) tightens controls of what the likes of Facebook can do with user data. If any breaches of data rules occur the "data processor" must notify regulators and affected users within 72 hours. If data is proven not to have been handled safely, fines up to EUR 20 million or 4% of annual revenue can be metered out by regulators. Facebook's first such case is in the pipeline after a data breach with at least 50 million users - 2 million within the EU - was discovered in September 2018.

**What GDPR does:**

- Makes it more difficult to export private data, such as user data, metadata from photographs, geolocation and facial recognition.
- Protects the users’ right to have their own private data erased.
- Protects the right to in certain cases say no to authorities’ as well as corporations’ use of personal data.

**What GDPR does not:**

- Is deal with data protection. It does not address issues of content, hate speech, misinformation, defamation, false accounts, artificial intelligence, etc.

**Comment**

Internet service providers, telecom companies and governments store and share vast amounts of data about users that should be kept secure with clear policies in place. Companies, as well as the Ethiopian state, would benefit to have at least similar consumer protection of data as the European Union.

**Consumer protection**

- Facebook signed a voluntary code of conduct with the EU in 2016 that dealt with hate speech. The deal was meant to give Facebook a chance to self-regulate, but recent disclosures about Facebook have cast doubt over the company’s ability to regulate itself:
  - The Cambridge Analytica disclosures, the company harvested the personal data of millions of people’s [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/) profiles without their consent and used it for political purposes. In December 2015, The Guardian reported that Cambridge Analytica used the data at the behest of Ted Cruz. Cambridge Analytica also assisted with President Trump’s campaign, according to online sources.

The Brexit campaign use of data prepared by Cambridge Analytica to convince voters.

Facebook’s partner deals with other tech companies and app developers, which was not disclosed by Mark Zuckerberg during his hearing in Congress but revealed in the media in May 2018.

Continued use of Facebook groups and WhatsApp to publish "extreme content and hate speech that easily violates Facebook’s terms of service and community standards". The use of groups keeps hateful and false content hidden from the public but "they can gain traction and initiate large-scale information-seeding and political influence campaigns" (many early posts about migrant "caravans" came from Facebook groups).  

Facebook’s liberal release of user data to third parties after 2012 has been held secret to a large extent. At least one third party developer who invested in a bikini app sued Facebook after the company withdrew its data after disclosures and massive public discontent. The legal process and documents were kept secret, but the British regulator found a backdoor to gain access to the information which is now part of its Facebook-Brexit investigation.

In 2018 a group of companies including Facebook and Google signed a new effort by the EU to combat news manipulation and online attempts to interfere with elections. EU asks the companies to remove “verifiably false or misleading” content and to declare and be transparent about, what is political advertising. This self-regulatory initiative, which follows a similar initiative relating to hate speech in 2016, has been criticised for not having “measurable objectives” and for giving private companies powers to censor content.

Data rights organisations, civil society organisations and media representatives, among others, are pressing internet tech companies to be transparent about what rules they have for censoring and how they are enforced. Similarly, they should disclose how they deal with requests from governments and others to remove content. Research by data rights groups shows that private companies are extremely bad at disclosing on what grounds content is removed. They need to disclose figures and reasons for removal, filtering and restriction of content, including to notify users when they make changes.

88 rights groups in November 2018 called on Facebook for a proper appeal process for removed content.

There are to date no penalties involved in these voluntary initiatives between the EU and, in particular, the data tech industry on hate speech and misinformation respectively.

The mid-term elections in USA passed without any major data breaches or signs of widespread, coordinated misinformation as was the case during the Presidential election. Usage of automated bots were down by 50 %.

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20 What’s happening on Facebook this midterm election is scarier than ever, Quartz, Nov 7, 2018. https://qz.com/1453127/facebook-manipulation-this-midterm-election-is-scarier-than-ever/
22 Rankingdigitalrights.org, https://rankingdigitalrights.org/category/blog/
Comment
Ethiopia, with its own history of trolling, hate speech, misinformation and distrust, should find a way to implement, as a minimum, similar legislation and to rely on voluntary agreements with the tech industry. Considering deep-seated distrust, the government should allow for an independent commission with representatives from government, opposition, civil society, data rights organisations, media outlets and academic professionals to deal with social media platforms in a transparent process. Initially, they would need to urge Facebook, the leading platform in Ethiopia, to set up a team dealing with hate speech and misinformation.

Copyright law
EU in March 2019 introduced new copyright law, European Union Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market, designed to strengthen protection for original content, be it text, photo, video or music. The new legislation, to take effect by 27 EU member countries by 2021, requires online platforms to filter or remove copyrighted material from their websites and in that way direct revenue from tech giants towards artists and journalists. As of today, platforms e.g. YouTube are not responsible for copyright violations. The law was seen as a "balanced" approach that will make it easier for not the least small artists and writers to get paid for content while at the same time not affecting large internet platforms profusely.  The Directive does make exemptions for, although open for interpretation of e.g. "legitimate and non-commercial use of press publications by individual users" which allows then for hyperlink sharing.

Comment
Here too Ethiopia is well served to follow up on new EU legislation as well as take note on the surrounding freedom of the internet debate.

North America
- There is not yet any federal US privacy act similar to the EU’s GDPR, however the state of California has introduced a lighter version of GDPR.
- The Honest Ads Act bill was introduced in the Senate (Koblisher, Warner, McCain) and House of Representatives in 2017 to require websites to disclose political ads as is the case for ads on television, radio and newsprint. Google argues instead for self-regulation.
- Self-regulation is still the norm in the US. However, social media platforms, Facebook not the least, are undermining themselves by seemingly not taking their responsibility seriously enough, as recent disclosures have shown. This has caused some Senators to ask for stronger legislative measures against what is seen by some as unaccountable monopolies, "digital analogues to the railroad trusts of the Gilded Age".  

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23 What will change with the EU’s new copyright law?, Financial Times, March 26, 2019, https://www.ft.com/content/30e461bc-305c-11e9-8744-e7016697f225
24 What is Article 13? The EU’s divisive new copyright plan explained, Wired, 26 March 2019, https://www.wired.co.uk/article/what-is-article-13-article-11-european-directive-on-copyright-explained-meme-ban
Facebook, in particular, is under fire. It is argued that the company, which spent billions to purchase global personal data before it listed, has been fully aware for years that its algorithms are skewed towards confrontation leading to hate. This has been "exploited to disrupt elections, broadcast viral propaganda and inspire deadly campaigns of hate around the globe". Furthermore PricewaterhouseCoopers, on behalf of FTC (Federal Trade Commission) found no or very limited evidence that Facebook had monitored if its partners (such as Apple, Blackberry and Cambridge Analytica) had complied with regulation for third-party use of its data.

Antitrust legislation moves are gaining momentum, including by candidates for the presidential campaign 2020, arguing for the split up of in particular Facebook and Google.

A move by Facebook to introduce encryption and merging its platforms is, by some critics, seen as a pre-emptive measure against anti-trust action to make it too complex to challenge and "completely inaccessible to law enforcement, regulators and intelligence agencies".

Asia
Australia in early April 2019 - after the ChristChurch mosque shootings - passed a new law that can give jail terms for tech executives and fines with up to 10% of global sale if social media companies are not taking down "Abhorrent Violent Material" fast enough.

Social media reform - obstacles and opportunities

There is no country that has come up with any comprehensive social media reform - in practice, in legislation or regulation. There is a relative consensus that a laissez-faire situation, with hate speech infringing on other people’s freedom, is not acceptable at the same time as there is no room for censorship. With social media publishing comes a set of responsibilities for the publisher, distributor and user. Internet and social media is a work in progress with new insights being gained almost daily. That conversation should embrace legislators, media practitioners and indeed all citizens through massive media literacy. The UN Human Rights Council elaborates in a report in 2018 that states, internet tech companies and social media platforms are aligned with international human rights law and operate from the same page as media organisations.

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A selection of recommendations

The Media

- The media needs to look into revenue generation in a liberalised market where social media platforms are likely to dig into local media companies advertising revenues. There are ample examples and networks to make use of, including to form experimental digital media labs.
- Follow international developments, analysing to what extent targeted personalised advertising in its present form will be allowed to continue and what level of disclosure social media platforms may need to accept keeping in mind algorithm induced impact on freedom of speech and individual’s freedom of speech. Keep up advocacy vis-à-vis regulator and government to defend independent journalism and its necessary functions in holding power to account.
- To fervently oppose internet shutdowns, as other infringements of freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Observers note that shutdowns are mostly a reaction to disturbances where state violence played a central role. The government has also shut off the internet during school exams for fear of cheating.

The April conference primarily dealt with the challenges to media freedom in Africa and a global digital world. Photo: Michael Tewelde.

Recommendations should be seen as a starting point for discussions. The social media landscape is changing rapidly.
Government

- Firstly, the telecommunications infrastructure should be expanded to the whole country. Secondly, pricing has to come down.
- The government has made huge, potentially game changing progress across the board to build trust by releasing prisoners, dropping charges, unbanning websites and allowing political opposition to operate freely. Intermittent closures of the internet and blocking of social media nationally and regionally have undercut some of that trust. Trust needs to be built through transparent disclosure and reform measures in collaboration with civil society and the media.
- Keep the momentum going and convince all crucial stakeholders that liberalisation of the media, including social media is essential.
- Allow Ethiopian news media companies, in particular, to collect advertising revenue at home and abroad in a manner that supports media sustainability and diversity.
- Furthermore, unwarranted surveillance and censorship should end.
- The government’s modus operandi to deal with political tension has ‘traditionally’ been to shut off broadband and mobile internet. Internet closures continue to be epidemic, even after Prime Minister Ahmed took office, e.g. the cities of Harar and Dire Dawa, as well as the whole Somali region, were shut off for 22 days. In September mobile internet was cut off in Addis Ababa. Between May 30 and June 8 2018 mobile internet was also shut down.
- Pieces of legislation allowing such a strategy needs to be reviewed, become transparent and comply with international law.
- Laws like the Media Law, the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation and Computer Crime Proclamation are currently being to measure up to international norms. The findings need to be inclusive of social media and limit state controls of the internet and social media traffic by the state.
- The Ethiopian Information Network Security Agency (INSA) has, according to media reports, been involved in attempted hacking of Ethiopian journalists in USA, Canada and Belgium. If true, such practices should come to an end if credibility is to be kept.31
- Widespread media reports of government use of sophisticated surveillance to intercept calls, emails and SMS through a centralised monitoring and management system needs to be addressed in a transparent manner.

31 Citizenlab reports cyber-attacks against opposition leaders and diaspora Ethiopians: https://citizenlab.ca/2017/12/champing-cyberbit-ethiopian-dissidents-targeted-commercial-spyware/
Aside from how to deal with social media, equal representation for women, how to cover elections in a fair way, new business models, media literacy, journalism representation and the need to for self-regulation were all hot topics at the Addis Ababa Conference.

Photo: Michael Tewelde.

All stakeholders

- The independent Media Council to be registered also needs to look into social media issues and not only focus on legacy media.
- Consider establishing completely independent social media monitoring centers.
- Regulators need to deal with social media platforms to assure that they take responsibility for content published on their websites for the same reason as they are taking down extreme content in the US and in EU countries. This includes:
  - Identifying hate speech and false news in collaboration with independent monitors.
  - Publicise such censoring measures and setting up a disclaim mechanism so that those who have been in effect censored have a chance to make their case.
  - Disclosing all political advertising. In the case, if Russian trolling and misinformation in the US it was disclosed 126 million people had seen the Russian posts on Facebook.
- Regulators should also actively urge Facebook to disclose how it harvests data from, at the moment 6.1 million social media users in Ethiopia and this will have a significant effect on economic life. Facebook, which claims it can reach all social media users in Ethiopia\(^{32}\), easily commands the largest repository of personal data, photos, messages and likes (what followers like) of Ethiopians. The sale of such

\(^{32}\) Wearesocial.com 2019, slide 2.2
personal data to clients – be they commercial or political – is how Facebook extracts value from users.

- On a similar note, Facebook owns WhatsApp, a peer-to-peer encrypted messaging service, which in many other countries has caused more havoc than has the social media platform. There is a need, and demand from stakeholders, for transparency from Facebook’s side also on that score.

- Ethiopian regulators, together with civil society and the media industry, should meet with Facebook to iron out issues of market access, taxation, privacy and transparency.

- Ethiopian stakeholders need to keep an eye on how social media practices in the country measure up to international human rights and freedom of speech commitments. UNESCO’s global media and information assessment framework offers a media matrix, as well as a social media kit, the country can measure itself against and get inspiration.