Article

Fragile Democracy: Media Freedom and Radical Polarisation in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Fragile states are conditioned by the politics of interests, which oscillates between social, ethnic, factional, political and economic agitations. The politics of interest impairs shared identity and creates a tense coexistence between already fragmented communities. Ethiopia presents an example of the erosion of democratic norms despite the constitutionally imposed politics of ethnically and regionally based societies. Fragile states defy theoretical wisdom, as the media and elections might, in certain circumstances, produce negative results by creating a fractured society rather than resolving the legitimacy crisis. This article analysed academic literature and reflected on theories of the media in democracy to deconstruct the role of the legacy and new media in radical polarisation and nation-building in Ethiopia. Furthermore, illustrations were drawn from incidents and developments to clarify conditions that can help the mass media refrain from actions that deliberately or inadvertently impede socio-economic growth and worsen political conditions in fragile democracies. This article asserts that without context adaptation, the liberal norms of media autonomy and political inclusion might be incompatible with other forms of democracy beyond affluent democracies. It concludes by proposing theoretical visions of a 'democratic mirror', 'vigilantism and fraternisation' and the 'therapeutic' function of the media in fragile democracies.

Keywords

Fragile democracy, fragile states, media and politics, media freedom, polarisation, media ethics, Ethiopia

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Introduction

Fragile states (also fractured states) indicate divisions rooted in different political interests, factional or sectarian agendas, religions, languages or ethnicities. The divisions create a tense, delicate relationship and conflict between fragmented communities (Deane, 2013). Thus, fragility syndrome stretches itself to include an array of social and institutional problems, which ultimately sabotages a state's immunity to internal or external shocks, paralysing the capacity to stimulate shared identity and leading to a precariously balanced coexistence as a fertile ground for conflict (Brinkerhoff, 2007). Fragile states are symptomatic of a weak government, the relegation of the rule of law to the periphery and the inability to execute essential governance functions or develop mutually constructive relations within the society (Deane, 2015).

Scrutiny of academic literature exposes two layers of variables, which provides a panoramic view for a conceptual and theoretical understanding of the causes and manifestation of state fragility. The first layer attributes the cause to weak political institutions, judicial deformity, limited political participation, the absence of executive checks and the excessive power of individuals or dominant political parties (Issacharoff, 2015). The second layer locates the cause of the inequitable distribution of natural resources or revenue allocation, ethnic composition, colonial heritage, turbulent political history and electoral transitions (Carment et al., 2009). A broader theoretical lens stretches state fragility to states with a dysfunctional judiciary, lawlessness and endemic corruption (Kassab & Rosen, 2019).

The liberal democratic model presents a benchmark for relations between the state and society. However, the liberal model is often incompatible with democracies beyond the West, as it does not account for fragile states' peculiarities, complexities and contextual factors (Rodrik, 2016). Thus, this article captured the realities of sociopolitical relations and networks in Ethiopia and how they differ from an ideal liberal democratic model. It begins with a brief history of the mass media in Ethiopia, an overview of media freedom in the country and the linkages to political participation and radical polarisation. Finally, this article examines the role of legacy and new media in radical polarisation and invents a media model in fragile democracies, which extends the liberal model and the conventional functions of the media in democracy.

The Political System in Ethiopia

The foundations of modern-day Ethiopia were conditioned by events in the aftermath of the Ethiopian Civil War from the 12th of September 1974 to the 28th of May 1991 and the consequent overthrow of dictator President Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991 by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)—a coalition of rebel forces led by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) (Lyons, 2021). Four distinct political parties formed the EPRDF: TPLF, the Oromo Democratic Party, the Amhara Democratic Party and the

Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (Lyons, 2021). The ethnic federalist political coalition exercised a stronghold on Ethiopian political life from 1991 to 2019 (Gebregziabher, 2019).

The June 1994 general election catalysed Ethiopia's current multi-party political architecture and a constitutional arrangement of ethnic federalism and devolution of power across semi-autonomous regions of 1,904 elective council seats was implemented by its first President Negasso Gidada and the EPRDF-led government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi Asres (Lyons, 2021). Furthermore, the 1995 constitution defined the country's political structure as a federal parliamentary republic with both a President and Prime Minister, a legislative system anchored on multicameralism with a house of representatives and a council, as well as ten ethnically based administrative regions and two self-governing administrations (Rock, 1996). The Federal Parliamentary Assembly in Ethiopia has two chambers: the Council of People's Representatives with 547 elective positions and the Council of the Federation with 110 elective positions—both on a five-year term limit (Rock, 1996). The Prime Minister exercises executive power as the head of government; legislative power is allocated to the parliament, while the judiciary retains autonomy from the executive and the legislature (Mehretu, 2012).

Although the EPRDF won the May 2005 general elections, the opposition rejected the results amidst claims that the election was marred by widespread vote rigging, intimidation and other electoral malpractices (Abbink, 2006). Nonetheless, the general election was historic for citizens and demonstrated a resolve to exercise their voting rights and participate in national politics. For instance, it recorded a large voter turnout of 90%, which indicated a shift to a more competitive multi-party political environment, restored confidence in authentic democratic governance and projected the emerging capacity of the media to portray political issues and mediate political debates for literate elites beyond ethnic fissures (Stremlau, 2011). More explicitly, this signalled an era in which the media dedicated itself towards creating global awareness about Ethiopia and facilitating a platform to reconcile aggrieved actors of the society through 'revolutionary democracy' (Stremlau, 2011).

However, the pre-2005 gains in the media landscape, the decline of repressive governance and the renaissance in political affairs were short-lived, as events in the aftermath of the national and regional elections in 2005 triggered dramatic changes in the Ethiopian media landscape. Ethiopia's ruling government reinstated an authoritarian policy of hostility towards the media, reversing initial progress in media and citizen freedom, suppressing dissent and punishing urban voters with new taxes amidst restrictions on civil and political rights (Gudina, 2011). Again, the reasonably strong showing by the main opposition coalitions in the 2005 elections was followed by a sudden deterioration in state-society relations (Arriola & Lyons, 2016). The government launched a tirade of raids and arrests following strikes and demonstrations in October and November; civil society leaders and political figures were the primary targets of the ruling party's zero tolerance for freedom of expression and a reluctance to separate political actors from civil society actors or groups (Mengesha, 2016; Svensson, 2019). For instance, the

Ethiopian police massacre of 2005 led to the death of 193 protesters, while over 700 civilians sustained injuries, and security forces detained thousands in the capital Addis Ababa (Abbink, 2006).

Consequently, political tensions among various communities across the country degenerated without mechanisms for dialogue, negotiation and compromise (Temesgen, 2015). This posed grave implications for the Ethiopian polity and set the tone for post-election pandemonium that has reversed significant gains in civil society participation in democratic processes. In November and December 2015, a government crackdown against peaceful protesters contesting the ownership transfer of a community school and swaths of a local forest to private investors led to the death of 75 people in the Oromia Region (Allo, 2017; Jalata, 2016). This coincided with widespread violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of speech and media autonomy, which eventually triggered violent protests and the death of over 50 student protesters in the Oromia and Amhara regions on the 5th of August 2016 (Ademe, 2022; Allo, 2017). The continued civil unrest undermined the power of the TPLF within the coalition, leading to the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn as head of the EPDRF coalition and the emergence of Abiy Ahmed as the Prime Minister in April 2018 after winning the EPDRF leadership elections.

In November 2019, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (now Chairman of the EPDRF) dissolved the EPDRF and formed a new Prosperity Party on the 1st of December 2019. However, the Prosperity Party instituted by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed alienated the TPLF. Still, it incorporated the other three former coalition parties, which exacerbated the political friction between the government and the TPLF (Lyons, 2021). Ethiopia's Tigray region has been plagued by civil conflict between government forces and ethno-regional militias. The region has also endured intimidation by security forces and violations of free speech, while political factionalism and inter-communal violence remain perennial problems in the country. Although citizens continue to agitate for liberal values and accountability, Prime Minister Abiy's government has failed to mitigate the political challenges that sabotaged the EPRDF and continued to exhibit authoritarian political tendencies in the absence of strong institutions of democratic governance and the presence of ethnically fragmented media landscape (Jima, 2021).

Political Participation and Radical Polarisation in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is a federal parliamentary republic with nine regional entities and constitutional governance that confers power to states (Mehretu, 2012). The ethnolinguistic nature of the regional states in Ethiopia makes it a recipe for conflict, as it is not feasible to accommodate the interests of all ethnolinguistic groups or guarantee representation for them. For instance, Marcus (2002) found substantial evidence that Ethiopia's southern areas nurse grievances against the inhabitants of the northern region, whom they consider elitist and exploitative. There is a stoking of communal tensions amidst allegations of economic predation and repression of ethnic minorities in the southern Oromia region in

Ethiopia—mainly populated by ethnic Oromos (Berhane & Tefera, 2018). This has not fostered the spirit of unity but forced the ethnic minority Gedeos, who fled the attacks, into a protracted insurgency (Berhane & Tefera, 2018). These political developments created an impetus for the convergence of diverse ethnic groups, especially the regional state of Tigray, represented by the TPLF (Gebregziabher, 2019a).

Ethiopia not only is segregated along ethnolinguistic, religious and regional lines but is also partitioned along rural and urban communities. Inequalities, extreme poverty, a history of tribal conflicts, religious tension and the politics of ethnicity have deepened the division between rural voters and heterogeneous urban voters. Similarly, the constitutionally imposed politics of ethnically and regionally based societies and the overlap of religion create a marginalisation of minority groups and social segregation, even in urban locations (Svensson, 2019). The outcome is a state fragility and conflict nexus, which can be attributed to the ethnography–linguistic diversity, different political orientations, nationalist–separatisms and endemic corruption.

Electoral victory amounts to total power in Ethiopia, triggering grievances that spiral into violence (Smith, 2009). Again, opposition parties in Ethiopia are mostly too weak, dispersed and divided to challenge the ruling EPRDF, thereby limiting the options of the predominantly urban electorates (Lyons, 2019). The main opposition parties boycotted the 1992, 1994 and 1995 elections, citing the government's domination of the media space to interfere in the political process (Abbink, 2000). Although they were profoundly fragmented and unable to challenge the ruling party, the opposition parties contested the 2000 and 2001 elections (Arriola, 2003). In the 2000 national elections, the opposition garnered a meagre 12 seats in the House of Peoples' Representatives because these political parties represented distinct local constituencies, and only a few had national roots (Kefale, 2011).

On the 2nd of April 2018, reformist politician Abiy Ahmed assumed the position of Prime Minister of Ethiopia. This was preceded by a prolonged political crisis reviving deep-seated grievances across the highly populated and ethnically fragmented country (Breines, 2019). Abiy announced economic and political reforms, including freedom for political prisoners, to address inequalities, promote political liberalisation and ensure a free civil society (Ylönen, 2019). Prime Minister Abiy's reforms further weakened rather than strengthened the state. For instance, on the 23rd of June 2019, indications of fragility surfaced with forces from the Amhara region launching a failed coup to dislodge Abiy's government. More recently, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed launched a retaliatory military offensive against the Tigray regional forces for its attack on a military facility in Mekelle and Dansha—both in Tigray (Labzaé, 2022). The Abiy government looks increasingly vulnerable due to deep divisions in the ruling coalition, lingering ethnic conflicts, discontent and the problem of internally displaced people. However, a renewed conflict could resuscitate weakened and repentant emancipation groups or inspire ethnic mutation opposed to the central government—an ironic twist given the efforts of the Abiy administration to eliminate the politics of identity.

Media in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is Africa's oldest independent country, stretching across an area of 1.13 million sq km (437,794 sq miles) and a population of 102.5 million (BBC News, 2019). Christianity and Islam are the dominant religions, while the rest of the population are atheists or identify as adherents of traditional faiths, Bahá'í Faith, Jews and Hindus (BBC News, 2019). The major languages are Amharic, Oromo, Tigrinya and Somali. The Oromo are the largest ethnic group at 35%, with their population scattered across 12 clusters and ten provinces (Henze, 2000). Emperor Haile Selassie's quest for political centralisation in the early twentieth century informed his adoption of Amharic as the official language of the state, the military, the Orthodox Tewahido church, and several regional states within the federal system (Salawu & Aseres, 2015).

The media environment is clustered into local languages, but Amharic-language newspapers represent the mainstream. The emergence of English-language newspapers like the Ethiopian Reporter, Addis Standard and the Addis Fortune represents Ethiopia's growing inclination towards contemporary norms of journalism (Lanza & Woldemariam, 2013). Salawu and Aseres (2015, p. 71) observed only three broadcast stations in Ethiopia, while '38 of the 42 newspapers and magazines circulating in the country are in Amharic'. The Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation is the state broadcaster responsible for distributing time slots to regional and independent television channels (Abebe, 2019). Recent developments in Ethiopia suggest increased access to information, improved legislative design for journalistic pursuits and the ease of obtaining private broadcasting licences. However, evidence suggests that this is a case of 'selective liberalisation', where freedom is accompanied by coercive control of the official news agency, the use of anti-terrorism codes to repress journalists and the blockade of political websites (Skjerdal, 2013).

Media Freedom and Democracy in Ethiopia

A free and autonomous media facilitates shared identity and stimulates civic dialogue, which is crucial for vibrant political life and the preservation of the social fabric (Beckett & Kyrke-Smith, 2007). On the other hand, a free and diverse media promotes division, intensifies factional identities and compromises state stability, especially in fragile states where governance/government is weak. For instance, Tigray and Oromia region-based media outlets were conceived by radical ethnic nationalist groups like the TPLF and the Oromia Liberation Front— as propaganda channels for sovereign power and self-determination (Gessese, 2018, p. 17). These ethnically oriented and fragmented media practices foster divisions by injecting historical context and negative memories into frames during conflicts. Tigray and Oromia region-based media tend to report conflicts that occur in the Amhara region by applying framing themes of 'Amhara ethnic groups are still doing mass killings and genocide of minority ethnic groups as their former fathers did' in Ethiopia (Gessese, 2018, p. 17).

The year 2019 witnessed a reduction in cases of harassment and intimidation of journalists and bloggers in Ethiopia, as jailed journalists and thousands of political detainees were released (Abebe, 2019). However, the 2008 Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation, which claimed to guarantee press freedoms, only recycled previous provisions to create a rebranded version of state censorship in the form of licensing, prosecution, prohibited topics and access to websites, although diaspora media platforms are still frequent in Ethiopia (Zeleke, 2019). Similarly, the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation of 2009 served as an instrument to criminalise political activities, the right to freedom of expression and norms of media freedom (Mengesha, 2016, p. 92). In January 2014, the government published an official document about the content of seven independent magazines, condemning them as sympathetic to extremist political parties (Roberts, 2019).

The government resorted to the imposition of a media blackout aimed at curbing the supposed excesses of the media (Ross, 2009). However, the state-owned media and private newspapers such as *Addis Fortune* and *The Reporter* have been free of government assault on the media (Abbay, 2009). The ruling party later tightened its grip on the private press, widening the coverage gap rather than extending negotiated access to state-controlled media for opposition political parties and civil society (Teshome, 2009). The Ethiopian regulatory agency launched a clampdown on diaspora platforms, civic space and messaging applications (Roberts, 2019; Zeleke, 2019). Many prominent journalists, news editors and publishers were either harassed, arrested or exiled in the aftermath of the election-related violence (Roberts, 2019). According to the Freedom House global index (2023), Ethiopia ranked 114 in 2022 and plunged 16 places in 2023 to rank 130 (out of 180 countries) on the spectrum. The decline highlights the volatile nature of the media landscape in Ethiopia, the corresponding increase in the animosity towards journalists and a growing aggression against civil liberties and norms of media freedom by the government.

The Role of Media in Polarisation

The role of the media in polarisation has courted divergent opinions and changed the complexion of the fragile state discourse. The mass media ecosystem forms the nucleus of deliberative theatre on political issues, topics and events, reflecting citizens' reliance on the mass media to set the momentum for active political discourse and a source of information on political affairs. The mass media presents an 'inclusive opportunity for all parts of society which are likely to be affected by policies, or who hold views upon alternative policy approaches, to be recognised and able to make their voices heard' (Blumler & Coleman, 2015, p. 113). On the other hand, polarisation is a process whereby the multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly aligns along a single dimension, and people in a given society increasingly conceive and approach politics within the logic of 'us' versus 'them' (McCoy et al., 2018, p. 18).

Polarisation in fragile states produces adverse outcomes that trigger politics of alignment and deepens party polarisation, which erodes democratic imperatives

and results in a political impasse or crisis. Nonetheless, polarisation may result in a reformed democracy, which produces opportunities for a society to mobilise and achieve fundamental changes in structures, institutions and power relations (McCoy et al., 2018; Somer & McCoy, 2018). For instance, elite political actors rely on the mass media to articulate ideas on political issues (Voltmer, 2006). The absence of an 'elite pact' in Ethiopia, particularly the lack of grassroots support for the urban political elite, has led opposition elites and urban voters alike to dismiss the impact of the EPRDF's policies on the voting patterns of rural communities (Svensson, 2019). The implication is a systematic exclusion of marginalised groups and their legitimate concerns. Snyder and Ballentine (1996, p. 14) attribute this to 'imperfect competition in a marketplace of a commodity (political support and policy commitments), where elites divert civic participation and exploit media monopolies' in ethnically segmented markets.

The media does not play a pedestrian role in political life, and media audiences actively seek political information from platforms that align with their ethnic or regional interests and political interests (Sullivan, 2019). For instance, the activities of the Oromo movement and the Oromia Media Network led by Jawar Mohammed suggest that the rise of political activism may accelerate political and social polarisation, extremism and secessionist aspirations (Arora, 2019). For instance, the Oromia Broadcasting Network and the Amhara Media Corporation were conceived as propaganda vehicles for sovereign power, as journalists representing the outlet tend to advance ethnic interests and disregard objectivity and ethical imperatives in pursuing their journalistic obligations (Skjerdal & Moges, 2021).

The mass media is fundamental for self-organised political interaction and mediated political interest (Habermas et al., 1974). However, political actors and governments hijack the mass media, simultaneously creating a common enemy by 'manufacturing consent' and invoking public resentment against this common enemy or oppositional actors (Herman & Chomsky, 2010). Thus, the ethnic composition of the media landscape in Ethiopia assumes a dangerous configuration, as the media use sources who are sympathetic to their ethnic interests and deploy 'annihilation and othering' frames to neutralise criticism against 'own' ethnic group or to de-emphasise the positive aspects of other ethnic groups (Skjerdal & Moges, 2021, pp. 41–42). This is instituted in 'nationalist mythmaking: the attempt to use dubious arguments to mobilise support, discredit opponents and promote falsehood' (Snyder & Ballentine, 1996, p. 10).

Newspapers in Ethiopia portray distinct political tendencies, which correspond to the differing political attitudes of their readerships, as journalists and media owners demonstrate political ties or allegiances. The previous assertion is reminiscent of 'political parallelism', which encapsulates the presence of distinct political orientations in the media, the intercourse between the media and political organisations, and the tendency for media personnel to participate in political life (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Community radio in the country serves as a venue for negotiations and constructive narratives of peace to diffuse inter-ethnic hostilities (Mohamed, 2016). However, the ethnic alignment of these diasporic and local radio stations culminates in polarisation and political parallelism, which fosters a politics of 'us' versus 'them' (Bekele, 2019).

The New Media and Polarisation in Ethiopia

The Internet decentralises the public sphere to promote deliberation for democratic communication. The previous assertion is profoundly patronising and deflects attention from reality, particularly in a fragile state like Ethiopia. The inequalities in information access and new media literacy fragment political discourse and create an imbalance in political representation and political participation in the digital sphere (Papacharissi, 2002). The new media has redefined the notion of political participation and pluralistic democracy (McQuail, 2010). Notwithstanding, the decentralisation component of the Internet orchestrates agonistic pluralism that endangers democratic communication in fragile states.

Deane (2013, p. 7) describes these developments as the 'explosion of people's access to information and their capacity to communicate and express themselves'. The increasing emergence of online media conditioned by ethnic affiliations and minority interests has led to the proliferation of 'community, alternative, oppositional, participatory and collaborative mass media practices' (Deuze, 2006, p. 262). However, political participation and development are separate constructs, and greater participation does not always yield political dividends or birth a vibrant democracy. Thus, it is premature to interpret the access and capacity facilitated by the new media and 'technologies of freedom as strong forces for democratisation and political development, especially in large parts of Africa' (Hafez, 2005, p. 145).

The Internet has transformed oppressed minority groups in Ethiopia into active participants in the political communication process. The echoing and homogenising effect of the Internet within social communities (Frechette, 2019) has pronounced cultural tribalism in Ethiopian politics. In Ethiopia, politicians use social media to create political encounters, manipulate information and exploit a sense of discontent among ethnic minorities in a manner that endangers governance (Kumlachew, 2014). Consequently, social media creates a dangerous variance. Social media is a fulcrum for a self-organised public platform to convey political opinion and facilitate political interaction in many states (Shirky, 2011). Conversely, social media provides a platform for the uncontrolled dissemination of fictitious information and propaganda messages, often detrimental to democratic life and the political stability of fragile states (Deane, 2013). Thus, mischievous elements may blow legitimate grievances out of proportion, induce a false sense of political exclusion that neutralises development efforts and resort to violent armed struggle (Gorton, 2016).

Theories of the Media in Democracy

Siebert et al. (1956) theorised a democratic system where public opinion thrives on freedom of speech and the presence of an interactive connection between the state and the people to legitimise power. This is not the case in authoritarian systems that enforce stringent censorship, exercise arbitrary power, prioritise elitist interests and stifle the interests of the ordinary people (Siebert et al., 1956). The classic competitive elitists refrained from discussing media autonomy and

power. The realist variant of the 'competitive elitist democracy' theorises a free media that serves as a watchdog, feeds the public appetite for information and advances elitist debates (Scammell & Semetko, 2018). The informational-instructive function of the media is compatible with the information democracy perspective and the democratic-participant approach regarding citizens' right to the constant supply of information for broad political participation and the operation of political systems (McQuail, 1987). The previous assertion is particularly appealing to pluralist political perspectives of governance, which expect that power and decisions are concentrated within the framework of a central government but distributed among groups and non-state actors.

Christians et al. (2010) postulate a normative theory, which they anchor on the premise that the role of the media in a democracy is contingent upon the complexity of inter-relation between communicative traditions, democratic models and editorial roles. They dissolved the role of the media into four distinct categories: the monitorial role, the facilitative role, the radical role and the collaborative role (Christians et al., 2010). The monitorial role presents the media as a vigilant informer who collects, publishes and distributes information of interest to audiences and other actors. The media as a 'facilitator' implies that the media reflects the political order and constructs a deliberative theatre for diverse civil society voices in a democratic setting (Christians et al., 2010). The 'radical role' demands that the media ensure absolute equality and freedom in a democratic society, regardless of political imbalances and the presence or absence of access to information (Christians et al., 2010). Finally, the 'collaborative role' posits the media as a check and channel for power (Christians et al., 2010).

Deliberative democratic public sphere theory extends the notion of liberal democracy, citizen deliberation and counter-publics. The public sphere is an area of sociopolitical life where citizens converge to identify and debate sociopolitical problems to influence political action (Habermas, 1997). Habermas (1997) stretched the term 'public sphere' to encapsulate the dynamics of mediatised and non-mediatised (social, communal and digital) public forums to transact ideas, information and conflicting views. This takes cognisance of the democratic role of radical exclusion and associated counter-discursive struggles that stretch the context of legitimate deliberation.

Media autonomy, diversity and function of democratic responsibility are sacrosanct to the emergence, maturity and transformation of democracies (McQuail, 1987, pp. 117–118). In the Western world, media freedom is fundamental in a broader constellation of inalienable rights synonymous with participatory politics, representative government, civil liberties, freedom of speech, information and association (Maniou, 2022, p. 2). On a cautionary note, norms of media freedom and democracy in many Western societies have been affected by the degree of stability in the political environment, gradual erosion of critical institutions, negative partisanship and increasing receptivity to populists or political forces allergic to democratic tendencies. For instance, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Finland (democratic-corporatist states) enjoy comparatively higher autonomy than their Western counterparts in the liberal media systems (the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Ireland), polarised pluralist

media systems (Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy) and the post-communist media systems located in Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria and Romania (Maniou, 2022, pp. 12–17).

Furthermore, the fragmentation of news media, the emergence of radically partisan media and the propagation of partisan messages in mainstream media have, in part, contributed to political polarisation in the Western world (Prior, 2013). Arbatli and Rosenberg (2021) observed that polarisation aggravates the hostility between political and ideological rivals and heightens voters' susceptibility to electoral manipulation, deliberative restrictions and the prevalence of anti-democratic, intimidatory and discriminatory tactics by opposition groups in Turkey, Hungary and the United States of America. Similarly, far-right groups such as the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany have evoked Nazi-era narratives such as the 'Lügenpresse' (lying press) and 'Systempresse' (system press) to exploit free speech, disparage the media, penetrate mainstream politics and evangelise policies that undermine norms of liberal democracy (Tworek, 2021).

Nonetheless, empirical evidence suggests a greater appreciation of the media as an important democratic institution and voters' antipathy to the populist radical right in Europe—an indication of democratic resilience and widespread receptivity to liberal democratic values (Maniou, 2022; Meléndez & Kaltwasser, 2021). Consequently, theoretical approaches conceive the liberal model as both the trademark and prerogative of the Western world—for which non-Western states ought to imitate. However, media freedom and diversity may assume a dangerous twist to impede democratic functioning in fragile democracies or limit civil liberties, democratic functioning and dissenting voices in flawed democracies (Deane, 2013; Neff & Pickard, 2021).

The literature and theoretical perspectives on media freedom have been dedicated to political and economic variables in a broader sense, ignoring the cultural, political and economic peculiarities and complexities across different societies (Maniou, 2022). Fragile democracies are plagued by socio-economic problems, radical polarisation, weak governance and representative architecture that results in a legitimacy crisis, and constant confrontations by powerful non-state actors with the intent to overthrow a legitimate government and secede or form a parallel government (Brinkerhoff, 2007). Thus, there is a need to exercise caution with the obsession, potential universality and applicability of the liberal model in fragile contexts.

Towards a Media Model in Fragile Democracies

Democratic governance is resident in the capacity and opportunity for citizens to engage in a rational debate on a political space that guarantees inclusion. The media is fundamental to democratic architecture, as it is an intermediary between the state and its citizens. Democratisation includes multi-party elections, individual and community rights protection, a vibrant press and the freedom to form associations, advocacy and interest groups (Smith, 2007). For nation-building, it is imperative that the mass media refrain from prioritising political

interest groups and elite sources of information (Wolfgang et al., 2018). This projects the need for ethnic and political neutrality for the media to preserve and regulate fragile democratic settings. Thoughtful interactions and opinion formation along pluralistic lines are crucial for nation-building. However, existing theories of the media in a democratic society are generic and tailored to the political realities of Western societies. This section proposes a model for a pluralist but not radically polarised media in fragile states.

In Ethiopia, sociopolitical existence is marked by conflicting interests rooted in representation and governance. For instance, the region-based media outfits circumvent the government monopoly on the information infrastructure and rely on ethnic rhetoric as an editorial playbook to help the regional government reach their constituencies with messages that resonate (Skjerdal & Moges, 2021). Nonetheless, the media in fragile states must refrain from functional biases that can deliberately or inadvertently irritate or damage the frail political ligaments and social spine of an already fragile state. I describe this as a 'vigilantism and fraternisation' function to encapsulate the need for the media's ability to construct sociopolitical relations and create a marketplace for state and non-state sociopolitical adversaries to converge without recourse to ethnic affiliation. This can address citizens' reliance on non-state actors: 'tribal chiefs, clandestine societies, gangs, militias, insurgents, community or religious leaders' to agitate their sociopolitical interests in fragile contexts (Denney, 2012, p. 73).

The 'vigilantism and fraternisation' function expects the ethnic or regional media to address problems associated with linguistic heterogeneity by giving space or voice to other indigenous languages. Moreover, the notion of shared political identity is often triggered by social or political events. Thus, the 'vigilantism and fraternisation' function assumes that the media can mediate social and political processes by actively exposing the fissiparous tendencies of social media use, strategic collaboration with state actors, policy or regulatory instruments enforced by the state and self-censorship as a reminder of its peacebuilding function across ethnic boundaries. Although this may attract resistance and be misconstrued as state censorship, the equitable distribution of media time and space to competing and underrepresented sociopolitical actors may strengthen the capacity of these sociopolitical, religious or civil society actors and media to adapt their messages and communication style for nation-building.

Furthermore, the 'vigilantism and fraternisation' function of the media dedicates itself to encounters that may transform perceived political enemies and rebellious ethnic minorities into adherents of democratic values and rituals. Thus, this can potentially harmonise conflicting interests, dissolve intergroup conflict and project the 'common political good' in fragile states. The premise is that this can either eliminate ethnic self-interest or relegate such interest to the periphery on the altar of national interest. This feeds the communitarian perspective of creating or rediscovering a lost sense of community and repairing social bonds. A sense of community and 'being with' manifest when individuals identify with a collective interest, which supersedes ethnic contention or individual interest.

The liberal model emphasises individual and collective freedom in society but ignores the increasing realisation that non-state actors are potentially dangerous,

mainly driven by political and economic interests (Denney, 2012). The dissonance between Western democratic processes and other democratic images is particularly noticeable in fragile democracies. Fragile democracies do not possess the structure, highly professionalised journalism, institutional arrangements or maturity to anchor individual freedom towards inalienable rights for everyone—as expected in a liberal society. Thus, 'promoting unconditional freedom of debate in newly democratising societies is, in many circumstances, a dubious remedy that is only likely to incite bloody outbursts and worsen the problem' of ethnic conflict (Snyder & Ballentine, 1996, p. 6).

McLuhan's (1964) notion of a global village is a broad term to describe the receding geographic borderlines, the communication interconnections and the cultural intercourse across the globe. The dissolving physical barrier creates a marketplace for the transaction of political knowledge, democratic products, attitudes, lessons and events with constructive and destructive outcomes. The media reflect the democratic world around them. In so doing, the mass media creates an atmosphere that can potentially help fragile states understand and navigate ethnic differences and sociopolitical challenges. In the context of state fragility, I describe this as a 'democratic mirror' function of the media.

The term transverses the threshold of mere collecting, distributing and publishing information—as often evangelised by media theorists. Instead, the 'democratic mirror' expects that the media sets the tone for achieving socio-economic and political prosperity. The premise here is the glorification of democratic dividends elsewhere and the importation of democratic events of relative significance or value. Thus, the 'democratic mirror' culminates in an awareness that triggers a process of democratic reflection, interdependence and solidarity between citizens and political actors.

Ethiopia's political history is marked by elite manipulation and the malicious use of the media to reproduce ethnic suspicion, which often leads to demonstrations, strikes and violent secessionist agitations (Svensson, 2019). The media landscape in Ethiopia also orients itself towards norms of 'revolutionary democracy', which has inadvertently polarised the media and impaired its capacity to serve as a deliberative theatre to aggregate conflicting or competing political and ethnic or regional interests towards national interest and nation-building (Stremlau, 2011). Following this logic, I propose the 'therapeutic function' of the media in a fragile democracy to illustrate the media's capacity to dismantle ethnic prejudice and dissolve historical grievances that are imprinted in collective memories. The 'therapeutic function' ascribes to the media a responsibility to induce a democratic renaissance that injects life into the political process and reconciles political impasse rooted in ethnic and linguistic differences.

In this case, the media may convey compelling emotional messages and political narratives oriented towards shared representations, virtues of nationhood and common identity anchored on ancestry, flags, symbols, artefacts or events of national pride. The media in Ethiopia may aggregate ethical and communal interest towards a collective sense of nationhood, patriotism and pride by promoting themes that project the country's diversity, defiance in the face of national adversity and history of successfully resisting imperialism. Thus, media

consonance along the given dimensions may simultaneously manufacture a convergence of interest and a homogeneous entity that provides a window for legitimate flows from the 'other' without the risk of violent pressure or resistance.

The mass media in fragile democracies is required to ensure a conducive electoral climate and a political atmosphere that is participatory, competitive and accountable (Stremlau, 2011). The mass media executes civic communication and accountability norms, which often prevent constitutional infringements and restrain political groups from reneging on pacts formed during electoral transitions (Blumler & Coleman, 2015). The 'therapeutic function' of the media gravitates towards using inclusive rhetoric and symbols to guarantee the protection of minority interests or dissenting voices against attempts to eliminate them from the political process. Vibrant democratic institutions and efficient governance are the prerequisites for political and democratic stability. Debatin (2015) observed that the surveillance function of the media warrants its prevention of unconstitutional doctrines to strengthen and restore confidence in the judicial institutions and eliminate violations of democratic values. Nonetheless, solid democratic institutions can suppress political differences in a manner that decreases or curbs violence.

Conclusion

The media's role as a custodian of democratic values and agent of democratic transformation has been an appetising item on the public and academic menu (Hafez, 2016). Media freedom encapsulates the liberal philosophical tradition: the autonomy of civil society, freedom of opinion, the absence of government control to ensure an independent media and the freedom journalists enjoy pursuing their journalistic obligations. Similarly, democratic governance is instituted in the capacity and opportunity for citizens to engage in rational debate, primarily through the mass media (Vandewoude, 2016). Thus, the media's capacity to exercise its natural functions in democracies is contingent upon media freedom that safeguards freedom of association, opinion, human rights imperatives and free and fair elections (Hafez, 2015). The previous assertion provides a basis to infer that democracy is significantly impaired in the absence of freedom of opinion, state intimidation and other forms of interference with media obligations.

State interference with free speech and media autonomy is widely conceived as an onslaught on democratic values. However, fragile democracies are often undermined by ethnic confrontations, occasionally punctured by military interventions, political drama and electoral violence. In Ethiopia, journalists in non-state media encounter state-sponsored harassment and navigate a hostile legal environment or are targeted based on perceived ethnic identity and political affiliation (Workneh, 2022). Similarly, journalists are also subjected to physical aggression and restriction of movement from vigilante groups, as well as other impediments posed by influential political personalities and state-weaponised media (Workneh, 2022).

Ethiopia does not possess the structure, professionalised journalism landscape and institutional arrangements to neutralise ethnic nationalist abuse of the media or anchor individual freedom towards inalienable rights for everyone—as expected in a liberal society (Gessese, 2018). In this case, media freedom may advance communal fusion or strengthen ethnolinguistic and sectarian divisions in political life (Beckett & Kyrke-Smith, 2007). State interference in the right to exercise free speech is often necessary for fragile political contexts to prevent anarchy and curb the rise of radical ethnic nationalists who may seek to hijack the media for political and secessionist goals. A free and diverse media might become a political minefield in certain circumstances, especially when they aggregate and represent factional identities or interests. As Deane (2013) observed, many popular media and communication trends reinforce and intensify separate identities rather than dissolve historical suspicion and encourage the development of a shared identity in fragile states.

In fragile democracies, the media manifest destructive and constructive tendencies as articulators, watchdogs and election monitors (Frère, 2015). More explicitly, political engagement and convergence in Ethiopia have not translated to democratic dividends, as the media is paralysed in the capacity to mediate political power and reconcile radically polarised sectors and actors within the society (Stremlau, 2011). The media in Ethiopia illuminates socio-economic and political issues and creates a deliberative enclave for literate elites to converge for political debates. However, politicians undermine democratic development in Ethiopia, invoking memories of previous political experiences and distressing events to mobilise political and social actions (Bekele, 2019).

Nevertheless, the media remains a vehicle for creating encounters for political enlightenment, online political participation, political plurality, bargaining and the propagation of democratic values in Ethiopia (Abebe, 2019). In this case, the media's 'vigilantism and fraternisation' function advanced in this article presents a blueprint for ethnic reconciliation to align polarised sectors towards shared political objectives and national interest. The 'democratic mirror' function of the media can induce a greater appreciation of democratic values in Ethiopia by importing lessons anchored on the socio-economic and political dividends of democratic life in other democracies, particularly countries with ethnically diverse populations. In conclusion, the ethnic prejudice and historical grievances that have become a dominant signature of national politics can be dissolved when the ethnically diverse media in Ethiopia embraces a 'therapeutic function' to strengthen the country's democracy.

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