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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Moges, M. A. (2017). Ethiopian journalism from self-censoring to silence: a case of reporting on internal conflict. *ESSACHESS - Journal for Communication Studies*, 10(1), 111-128. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-52948-2>

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## Ethiopian journalism from self-censoring to silence: a case of reporting on internal conflict

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**Abstract:** This article examines the extent to which journalists of The Daily Monitor and The Ethiopian Herald report on internal conflict, especially ethnic conflicts, which were prevalent during the study period, from 2005 to 2013, in Ethiopia. These two English medium dailies newspapers were purposely selected due to their high circulation and longevity in the media market as well as their focus on current affairs. The study employed both content analysis and interviews data collection and process in tools. The result shows that only a small number of internal conflict stories were reported in the selected newspapers and journalists were found to prefer refraining from reporting ethnic conflicts. This is attributable to the fact that journalists live in the circle of fear and self-censorship resulting in the exclusion of ethnic-related conflict stories in the selected media.

**Keywords:** internal conflict, Ethiopian media, fear and self-censoring, omission, silence

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*Le journalisme éthiopien de l'autocensure au silence: un reportage sur un cas des conflits internes*

**Résumé:** Cet article examine dans quelle mesure les journalistes de "The Daily Monitor" et "The Ethiopian Herald" rapportent sur les conflits internes, en particulier les conflits ethniques, qui ont été courants pendant la période d'étude, de 2005 à 2013, en Éthiopie. Ces deux quotidiens moyens anglais ont été choisis en raison de leur grand tirage et de leur longévité sur le marché des médias, ainsi que de leur focus sur les affaires courantes. L'étude a utilisé à la fois l'analyse de contenu et l'interview. Le résultat montre que seulement un petit nombre de narrations sur les conflits internes ont été signalés dans les journaux sélectionnés et que les journalistes préféraient s'abstenir de signaler des conflits ethniques. Ceci est attribuable au fait que les journalistes vivent dans le cercle de la peur et de l'autocensure, ce qui

entraîne l'exclusion des narrations sur les conflits liées à l'ethnie dans les médias sélectionnés.

**Mots-clés:** conflits internes, médias éthiopiens, peur et autocensure, omission, silence

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### **Introduction**

A century has elapsed since newspaper has appeared in Ethiopia. It was started in early 1900s but its progress was gradual due to strict control exercised by the monarchy (1920s to 1974) and the Derg regime (1974-1991). In those periods, media did not exercise their power in providing neutral information and serving the public as a forum for discussion. It was serving only the officials of the then governments.

A historical change has been observed in the Ethiopian media industry after the coming to power of the current government in 1991. The new government endorsed two laws that have brought significant changes on the media landscape in the country. These are the 1992 press proclamation and the 1995 Ethiopian constitution. These two laws have given freedom to both the media and the citizens to enjoy the right to freedom of expression. Specially, the 1992 press proclamation opened wider opportunities for any interested Ethiopian to own a newspaper or a magazine, and to circulate information. As stated in the proclamation, anyone could own newspapers when they fulfill the requirements listed in the declaration (Press Proclamation, No. 34/1992). The Ethiopian Constitution has further guaranteed the right to freedom of expression. In line with Article 19 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 29 in the Ethiopian Constitution also stipulates the following (Ethiopian Constitution, 1995):

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

These two laws have fundamentally opened a new chapter in the history of the Ethiopian media in shedding light on realizing the right to freedom of expression for both the citizens and the press in the country. As a result, many private newspapers and magazines started publishing. Unlike other periods, the proliferation of such privately-run newspapers and magazines in the media market in the country was so unprecedented<sup>1</sup> and they were critical of the government (Bonsa, 2002; Timothewos, 2010; Reta, 2013). Unlike other times, citizens have relatively enjoyed the availability of newspapers, especially until the 2005 general election (Price, Marashi, & Stremlau, 2009). Also, Praeg (2006) asserts that the government, parties

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<sup>1</sup> There were about 270 newspapers and 121 magazines during the first two years of the transition period (1991-1993) (Praeg, 2006). Also, Bonsa (2002) indicated that about 200 newspapers and 87 magazines came into existence in five years (between 1992 and 1997).

(opposition and ruling), individuals, and private enterprises were promoting their views through their own mouthpieces. As it is still observed, the ruling party (EPRDF) has been dominantly using the government media whereas the oppositions have been enjoying the private press. That is the reason why the Ethiopian media are characterized as polarized media (Bonsa, 2002; Rahmato & Ayenew, 2004; Media Sustainable Index, 2009; Price, Marashi, & Stremlau, 2009; Timothewos, 2010; Skjerdal, 2012; and others). Although the media is so polarized and the media landscape has fluctuated from time to time, it is possible to highlight that the media have still contributed to democracy and the right to freedom of expression. Comparing with the situations under the previous two governments, these first few years of the new government (from 1992 to 1997) can be described as a period of enlightenment in the Ethiopian media history. Skjerdal (2012) described that period as an era of proliferation of private newspapers in the country. Others have described the 2005 election period as best time for the Ethiopian media in terms of professionalism, vibrancy and the number of stable newspapers (Price, Marashi & Stremlau, 2009).

Currently, there are still media, especially in the private sector, which at least attempt to exercise the right to free expression. However, it cannot be described as large in number and vibrant in their reports as they had been before. The media have progressively been shrinking both in the number of publications and in their vibrancy. The government relentless pressures on, harassment and prosecution of journalists, especially those working in the free press, have discouraged many publications and forced them out of the market. Particularly, the highly contested 2005 general election that ignited violence eventually resulted in a massive arrest of journalists, politicians as well as in the banning and shutting down of many private newspapers. This had a chilling effect on the journalisms' engagement in reporting critical issues (Price, Marashi, & Stremlau, 2009; Stremlau, 2011; Doha Centre for Media Freedom, 2013). Due to the pressure, the number of journalists who went in exile since 2008 reached 48 (Doha Centre for Media Freedom, 2013).

This period could be considered as a setback with respect to media development in the current government. It could be rightfully described as a time that held back the media's engagement in the democratization process of Ethiopia. The 2005 crackdown on the media and later, the passing of the anti-terrorism law in 2009 have continued to have chilling effects on the independence of journalists, the expansion of the media, critical reporting on the political and policy issues. Decline has been visible in terms of the number of media outlets, their type and their critical reporting (EBA, 2016 November). Journalists who were trying to be critical of government and its policies before have now become more careful and have been navigating under the cloud of fear and heavy self-censorship (Price, Marashi, & Stremlau, 2009; Stremlau, 2011; Reporters Without Borders, 2013). Journalists in the surviving newspapers exercise curious reporting to be safe from harassment and criticisms, and to protect their papers from being shut down. The journalists working in both the private and state controlled media mostly self-censor. According to Reporters without Borders (2013), the media climate in Ethiopia has significantly deteriorated since 2005. As a result, the independence of journalists, freedom of expression, and free flow of information in the media have been curtailed. And, in looking at all these challenges, Ethiopia is ranked 137<sup>th</sup> out of 179 countries in the World Press

Freedom Index in 2013 in media freedom (ibid). Subsequent years did not show progress in press freedom. For example, in 2015, Ethiopia is ranked 142 out of 180 countries in the world (Reporters Without Borders, 2015).

In light of the situation described, above, this study is concerned with how internal conflict is reported in the Ethiopian media. The study demonstrates the interplay between freedom of expression and self-censorship of journalists with reference to internal conflict reporting in the Ethiopian media. This article specifically investigates how fear and self-censorship affect the selected newspapers in relation to reporting internal conflicts, in particular, ethnic conflicts.

### 1. Brief Overview of Internal Conflicts in Ethiopia

As a primary concern of this article, investigating the practice of the freedom of expression and self-censorship of the Ethiopian media in the case of reporting on internal conflicts, it is essential to review the conflict situation of the country. Historically, as one of the Horn of Africa countries, Ethiopia and its people have been suffering from both interstate and intrastate conflicts. The Ethiopian people have been in conflicts and wars enduring severe pain as a direct result of civil and other interstate wars. The recent conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea can be taken as an example of interstate war. The 1998-2000 Ethiopia- Eritrean border war over a disputed small area of '*Badem*' left close to one hundred thousand people dead from both sides. The war of words and the proxy war of the two countries have still been observed at various degrees. But, after the 1998/2002 severe and consequential war both for the people and their politics, there was no war supported by heavy weapons between the two states.

The country is still riddled with intrastate conflicts. Presently, various internal conflicts have sporadically erupted at various degrees. These are commonly ethnic, religious, border and resource rivalries in structurally divided regions and districts (International Crisis Group - ICG, 2009; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre - iDMC, 2009). The outbreak of internal conflicts and political violence in various parts of the country has become frequent, especially after the coming to power of the new government in 1991. For instance, ICG (2009) noted that as a means of getting attention and, rewarding strategy, the people have been organized based on their ethnic identity, which sometimes led them to conflicts. Similarly, Østebø (2007) noted that with the introduction of ethnic federalism in the country, the question of ethnicity has become highly politicized. For this reason, although the ethnic federalism is in place to solve the problem by answering the question raised by the nations in the country, it is also a cause of conflicts among the ethnic groups (Abbink, 2006; ICG, 2009; Kefale, 2010; Debelo, 2012). Although the causes, nature, magnitude, and complexities of the conflicts vary from region to region, all regional states in Ethiopia have been experiencing some sort of violent ethnic conflicts (iDMC, 2009). Some regions such as Oromia, Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP), and the Somali Region are described as conflict-prone areas. According to Ali & Falge (2006), nearly 70 internal conflicts in three regions have been observed after 1991 and people have been suffering from the ravages of those conflicts. Also,

Williams (2011) has listed 35 non-state armed conflicts in Ethiopia with estimated fatalities of more than four thousand from 1990 to 2010. In 2009, police on its part registered 28 different internal conflicts in a one-year period (in 2009)<sup>2</sup>.

In a similar manner, religious conflicts are becoming a common phenomenon under the current government. Needless to say, Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia have often been marked by religious tolerance and coexistence for centuries. However, due to various causes, a number of upheavals have been observed between the Muslims and Christians, between Muslims and the police forces/Government, and sometimes among Muslims themselves (Abbink, 2014; MoFA, 2011; Østebø, 2013). As examples of religion-based conflicts, one can mention Protestants and Muslims in Jimma of Oromia region, Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Arsi Zone of Oromia Region, and currently, the ongoing clashes between Muslim groups (*demetaschen yesema*- which means -let our voice be heard) and the police (government) in the capital and in most towns of Ethiopia where Muslims are predominant. MoFA (2011) noted that it has registered 48 religious conflicts in the country triggered by various religious causes. Mostly, the recently emerging Islamic sects and the contemporary Islamic fundamentalism spreading around the world as well as the feeling of long discrimination by Christians are often mentioned as the main causes of conflicts between Muslims and Police forces or between Muslims and other believers in the country (Østebø, 2008).

There have also been armed conflicts, sporadic attacks and fighting taking place in various parts of the country, mostly in the border areas. The Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and others have already waged war against government forces. The conflict between the government and the ONLF and the OLF is often described as one of long-standing conflicts in Ethiopia as well as in the Sub-Saharan Africa (GPI, 2015). Including others, these armed groups are currently designated by the Ethiopian parliament as “terrorist groups”<sup>3</sup>. These are ongoing conflicts between the government forces and liberation fronts/armed groups, especially the ONLF and the OLF, which have been fighting for secession and regional autonomy. Secession is one of the political rights enshrined in the Constitution, and it can be mentioned as a cause of internal conflicts in the country. As stated by Williams (2011), there were nearly 1000 fatalities in the Ogaden and 2000 fatalities in the Oromia region from 1998 to 2009 as the result of armed conflicts. Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), which has recorded ongoing violent conflicts in the world, has also identified three types of conflicts in Ethiopia as War and Minor conflicts, Non-state conflicts, and One side-violence. In these conflicts, UCDP has listed nearly 50 different conflicts in the last thirty years (UCPD, 2015). Armed Conflict Location and Events Data Project - ACLED (2016), which records each and every conflicts in the country, registered about nine hundred

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<sup>2</sup> Reporter newspaper, police announced that 28 new conflicts were registered in regions, April 09, 2009, page 2.

<sup>3</sup> On June 14, 2011, The Ethiopian Parliament made resolution that designed Ginbot 7, ONLF, OLF and others as terrorist groups.

incidents of ethnic, religious, armed, civilian and other types of group conflicts, which killed close to eight thousand people,<sup>4</sup> from 2005 to 2013.

Due to all these incidents, for instance, Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (HIIC) listed Ethiopia among the first top five African countries where many conflicts and serious tensions were registered, and most of which remained on a highly violent level<sup>5</sup> (HIIC, 2010). The Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) on its part listed Ethiopia almost at the bottom the world in terms of the level of peace, i.e., from 153 countries, Ethiopia was placed at 131<sup>th</sup> from the world and 30<sup>th</sup> from Africa in the 2011 Global Peace Index Ranking 2011<sup>6</sup> (IEP, 2013). In 2015, with some changes, it was listed at 119<sup>th</sup> from the world and at 27<sup>th</sup> from Africa (GPI, 2015). Still, the country has been described as one of conflict-sensitive countries in Africa as well as in the world. Considering the overall situations and the geopolitics of the country, Shinn<sup>7</sup> (2009) described Ethiopia as both the source and the victim of various problems in the Horn of Africa.

This background discussion can certainly show how conflicts have been prevailed in the country. This, in turn, can help the study to relate the media's interest in dealing with these conflicts- how internal conflict have been reported in the newspapers where their journalists are working in a climate of fear. This article mainly focuses on two main variables including frequency of reporting the case and the by-line of stories, which can show the overall tendencies of the journalists in reporting the internal conflicts.

## 2. Methods

The study selected two English dailies newspapers, namely *The Daily Monitor* and *The Ethiopian Herald*. Firstly, both newspapers are published in English language. They are believed to have similar audiences, i.e., they target international and diplomatic communities, elites, academia and others who understand English (Ward & Ayalew, 2011). Secondly, they can represent the ownership, both the private and the state owned. While *The Daily Monitor* is a privately, *The Ethiopian Herald* is a government-run newspaper. Thirdly, both newspapers have circulated in the Ethiopia media market for a relatively long period, for more than 15 years. *The Ethiopian Herald* has been in existence since 1943. Lastly, perhaps the most important one, both newspapers are described as news-oriented focusing on news content on current affairs and sensitive issues such as conflicts (Infoasaid, 2011; GCAO, 2013). Stories published in these two newspapers from September 2005 to August 2013

<sup>4</sup> ACLED version 6 (1997 -2015) <http://www.acleddata.com/data/version-6-data-1997-2015/> accessed 27 December 2016

<sup>5</sup> Ethiopia, Somalia, Nigeria, Chad and Sudan – HIIC (2010) [http://www.hiik.de/en/konfliktbarometer/pdf/ConflictBarometer\\_2010.pdf](http://www.hiik.de/en/konfliktbarometer/pdf/ConflictBarometer_2010.pdf)

<sup>6</sup>IEP report <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/2011-GPI-Results-Report-Final.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> David Shinn was the USA Ambassador to Ethiopia from 1996 to 1999

were reviewed. This period was purposively chosen, because there have been several incidents of internal conflicts during the time.

With the purpose of quantifying the manifest texts in the newspapers, the study employed content analysis. The two newspapers were reviewed and internal conflict issues (including ethnic) in the selected newspapers in the specified period were counted by three coders. A codebook was designed and pre-tested before the entire coding. Inter-coder reliability of the coders was also measured three times by using Krippendorff - Kalpha formula. The result of the last inter-coder reliability was 0.91, which was sufficient to proceed with the entire coding. Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) program was used to process the data. The frequency was used to quantify the types of conflicts and the number of stories posted in the newspapers during the sampled period. The by-line was also used to measure the extent of the journalists' direct involvement on reporting internal conflicts.

The study also employed interviews to collect data from the journalists. This tool helped the study to make sense of why the reporting is as it was. Based on the result of quantitative data, the interviews would further elaborate and deepen the understanding of the media situations in the country in relation to reporting internal conflict. Hence, by using unstructured and semi structured interviews, the study collected information from editors and editor-in-chiefs from the two newspapers. In total, four informants were interviewed, and the information was transcribed and read for qualitative analysis. Overall, the data gathered through content analysis and interviews were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

### 3. Data presentation

#### *Frequency of Internal Conflict Stories in Newspapers*

The two newspapers published 104 internal conflict stories in the eight-year period. *The Ethiopian Herald* published only 46 stories, whereas *The Daily Monitor* carried 58 stories. The probability of posting internal conflicts in each newspaper per edition was near to the ground (1.5 % in *The Ethiopian Herald*, and 1.9 % in *The Daily Monitor*).

**Table 1.** Coverage of internal conflict stories

		Types of Conflict				
		Ethnic	Religion	NP/RP	Others	Total
Type of newspaper	The Ethiopian Herald	1	21	19	5	46
	The Daily Monitor	4	3	46	5	58
Total		5	24	65	10	104



From the specified types of conflict in the country, NP/RP related conflicts were reported to a better extent than the others. According to table one, in the studied period, 65 conflict stories related to NP/RP were reported in the two newspapers. Religious conflict was the second. In the sampled period, 24 conflict stories related to religion were reported. With respect to stories related to ethnic conflict, the result was striking. There was only five stories altogether. Of these, *The Ethiopian Herald* published only one story, whereas *The Daily Monitor* reported four.

#### *By-line of the Stories*

The result of the quantitative data shows that majority of conflict stories in the selected newspapers were not reported by their own reporters. Journalists of *The Daily Monitor* and *The Ethiopian Herald* newspapers covered only one-fourth of the stories of internal conflicts published in the study period. They filed only 27 conflict stories out of the 104 stories reported in the sampled period. This shares only 25% of the total coverage. The staff journalists of *The Daily Monitor* reported 17 of the 58 stories whereas *The Ethiopian Herald* reported only 10 stories. This means that the journalists' share on reporting internal conflicts was minimal. *The Ethiopian Herald* received a large number of stories (22 stories from 46 stories posted during the sampled period) from local news agencies, namely the Ethiopian News Agency (ENA)<sup>8</sup>, and Walta Information Centre (WIC)<sup>9</sup>, and *The Daily Monitor* compiled stories from international news agencies/ transnational media. These news sources wrote 37 stories of internal conflicts during the study period. All of them were posted in *The Daily Monitor* (Table 2).

**Table 2.** By-line of internal conflicts in Ethiopian newspapers

News-papers	Journa-lists	Contri-butors	Other media	ENA/WIC	Foreign sources	Dis-patches	Total
The Ethi-opian He-rald	10	10	3	22	0	1	46
The Daily Monitor	17	0	3	1	37	0	58
Total	27	10	6	23	37	1	104

In short, while *The Ethiopian Herald* was highly dependent on local news agencies for conflict stories, *The Daily Monitor* was almost totally dependent on international news agencies for the same issues. These indicated that the local journalists in

<sup>8</sup>ENA is government owned, organized and financed by the Ethiopian government. The agency mainly reports stories that meet the government development policy. [http://213.55.98.22/ena/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=103&Itemid=28](http://213.55.98.22/ena/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=103&Itemid=28), Retrieved on November 30, 2014.

<sup>9</sup>Similarly, WIC is working to narrow the information gap in the country and it is party controlled institute. <http://www.waltainfo.com/index.php/about-walta>, retrieved on November 28, 2014.

each selected newspaper are seemingly avoiding the responsibility of reporting internal conflicts stories by themselves.

#### 4. Discussion and Analysis

##### *Marginalizing Internal Conflicts*

The content analysis indicated that the two dailies newspapers published only 104 stories in eight years. One may argue that this coverage is sufficient. However, this article argues that the internal conflicts in the countries are not well dealt. Rather, they are excluded from the audiences/readers. To support this argument that the newspapers were paying lesser attention to the internal conflicts, the following points are taken. At the very beginning, as McCombs & Shaw (1972) noted, one of the indicators that the newspapers are describing in giving prominence to a particular issue is the extent of its coverage in the newspapers. As a newspaper is one of the agenda setters, it is expected to make the case more vivid and a public agenda by reporting it prominently.

In addition, conflicts naturally attract journalists as well as readers. Conflict, as one of negative events, gets better attention by journalists while they select issues to cover in newspapers (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Commonly, the journalists, especially those working in private newspapers have ardent interest to report conflicts. Their interests in reporting the cases, perhaps in an exaggerated manner, may be related to the interest of the newspapers to sell high number of copies in each edition. This is because some events or issues are sometimes reported more to sell than inform (McManus, 2009). In connection to that, there is a common trend that the media report conflicts - "if it bleeds, it leads".

On the one hand, as one of the news selection criteria, proximity of the issue to both the local media and the local audiences encourage the media mainly to focus on local issues. Issues close to the public get better coverage in both breadth and depth (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Since the main subject of the study, internal conflicts, is a local issue covered by the local media, the case evidently gets better coverage. On the other hand, as the idea of a real-world indicator stipulates, if an issue is widely available, it gets a wider chance to be reported (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). As noted earlier, the country has experienced a number of internal conflicts during the studied period.

Given the above factors, the probability of reporting internal conflicts and including the stories in the newspapers could have been higher. However, the result shows that only 104 stories were reported in the study period. This indicates that the two newspapers did not give much attention to covering internal conflicts. The cases were underreported in the two newspapers.

##### *Omission of Ethnic Issues*

When it comes to ethnic conflicts, the newspapers extremely shied away from dealing with the case. Only five stories were reported in eight years. This tends to show that the ethnic conflict was either not the priority or purposely omitted in the

newspapers. As noted earlier, there were ethnic conflicts during the study period. One may argue that these conflicts might not be accessible to the journalists. And, they preferred to focus on the more reachable issues. This reason does not hold water to the total silence of the newspapers to the ethnic issues. This is because the newspapers reported other issues such as, NP/RP conflicts, which were happening in a remote part of the country. Distance was not the main reason for the total ignorance of the ethnic conflicts. An informant in *The Daily Monitor* noted that the newspaper purposely ignores some issues such as ethnic conflicts, in which their causes and consequences are not clear. This was vividly seen in the results that showed NP/RP was relatively reported better than ethnic conflicts. However, though the cases of NP/RP have been happening in the remote part of the country, in which is inaccessible (financially, riskiness and distance), they got some coverage in the sampled period. The same was true for religious conflicts. They were commonly happening in the capital city and other towns, which are close to the media. Ethnic and religious conflicts were also happening near to journalists; nevertheless, the former was seemingly excluded in the two dailies newspapers. What was seen in the country and what was reported in the newspapers are quite different. Reviewing only five stories in eight-year period in which there were various ethnic conflicts in the country can be a clear sign that the newspapers tend to omit the cases. The two dailies newspapers shied away from dealing with these issues.

#### *Lack of self-reliance*

One of the surprising findings is that the newspapers preferred to publish conflict stories that were circulated by other news sources (by-lines). As can be seen in Table 2, the selected newspapers highly relied on news agencies. For example, *The Ethiopian Herald* took 22 of 46 stories from the local news agencies, which are Ethiopian News Agency (ENA) and Walta Information Center (WIC). Similarly, *The Daily Monitor* has shown total reliance on external sources. The majority of the internal conflict stories published in the newspaper (37 of 58 stories) were taken from international news agencies and transnational media. The stories could sometimes be published as they were dispatched from the agencies. There are also times when the staff journalists would compile stories by adding some facts or crosscheck from the local officials. It is clear that the foreign media are valuable sources of news. They are most likely neutral and less biased towards local politics and are able to report the issues straightforward, and sometimes even in a sensational manner (Allen & Seaton, 1999). Understandably, being the local media, which are close to domestic politics and the publics, who are direct beneficiaries or victims of the conflicts, could be more serious in articulating the cases. As a result, there might be some biases. This may be one of the reasons why *The Daily Monitor* took most of the stories from the international news agencies. In fact, the limited capacity of the local media, both in finance and human resources, can also be mentioned here for the relative dependence on international news agencies (Allen, 1999). Informants from the newspapers agreed that one of the reasons that papers take stories from foreign news sources was related to their capacity to access the news stories. Foreign news sources fill the information gaps for the newspapers. Mostly, the information in the country, which could not otherwise be directly accessible and available to the local media, can be easily traced from the foreign media (Informant 1 and 2, person-

al interviews, April 2014). Sometimes, the newspaper even obtains unique perspectives and understanding of the local issues from the foreign news sources.

It is my argument that the newspapers are sometimes seemingly squeezed in two different things. The first one is serving the public, which is one of the common roles of the media. As information provider to the public, the newspapers prefer to report issues. The second one is the newspapers want to be in the safe side and free from any kinds of pressure. While the newspapers are dealing with issues, such as internal conflicts, they also face some challenges from the government, which control the media. Some newspapers, for example, *The Daily Monitor*, seem to rely on foreign news sources to report conflicts. Publishing information from foreign sources may minimize pressures that arise from the government if the reporting comes from staff journalists. One of the informants of the newspaper noted that journalists prefer to quote external sources to report conflicts, especially NP/RP (Informant 2, personal interview, April 2014). It is their pressure avoidance strategy and to be relatively free from legal liability and other persecution. It is almost becoming a trend in privately owned newspapers to take the stories from foreign sources; they may otherwise face intimidation or accusation from the government (Assefa, 2010). It can, thus, be concluded that international news agencies are serving as a shield for local journalists and a source of information to the local media in Ethiopia. This, in turn, infers that the journalists are mostly likely refrained from reporting the cases and free from pressures.

There is some concern related to professional ethics in reporting internal conflicts, especially in the case of ethnic conflicts. There are concerns among the journalists that reporting ethnic conflicts may potentially incite unexpected conflicts and enhance animosity among the communities in the country. Taking this as a reason, there are journalists who questioned the importance of reporting ethnic conflicts in particular and internal conflicts in general. As one informant mentioned, journalists usually refrain from reporting ethnic conflicts (informant 3, personal interview, May 2014). This is because a story may result in unexpected consequences. There is also a fear of inciting another conflict. This informant made reference to the Rwandan Genocide as one of the conflicts incited by the media. The bad memory of the Rwandan case has had indelible impact on the journalists in the newspapers. Thus, newspapers tend to avoid reporting ethnic related conflicts in particular and internal conflicts in general.

#### *Fear-induced reporting*

So far, the media's underreporting of internal conflicts has been discussed from the perspective of government coercion and the subsequent fear it invokes and self-censoring such fears forces journalists to stop reporting. This fact has been corroborated by accounts given by key informants from the two newspapers. According to the informants, self-censoring as the result of fear of pressure has been getting more visible in internal conflict reporting. Currently, journalists shy away from reporting issues critical of government. Particularly, conflicts related to rebel groups have not been reported as the extent to be due to fear of the anti-terrorism law.

Fear of the government are, however, slightly different for the state-run newspapers. The journalists' fear and then self-censoring in their report in *The Ethiopian Herald* can be described as pressure from editors, executive bodies, and the law. The pressure can also be both verbal and non-verbal criticism. An informant from the government-owned newspaper noted that it has become a routine practice that reporters make decisions in regard to which issues get reported and which issues do not get reported without consulting their editors. The journalists mostly avoid critical issues that may bring some criticism from their supervisors (Informant 3, May, 2014).

When it comes to private newspapers, they are under pressure due to the anti-terrorism law. Some of the key informants underscored that the anti-terrorism law has put the journalists under pressure while trying to report conflict, particularly NP/RP related issues. An attempting to cover these groups, some of whom have been designated as terrorism groups by the parliament, may result some risks. Under the prevailing conditions, most journalists prefer to avoid reporting internal conflicts related to NP/RP groups for fear of being locked up in jail. According to the law, if journalists are found guilty of reporting issues that promote or support the ideology of a so-called "terrorist group", they will be sentenced to at least ten years in prison<sup>10</sup>. The informants stated that they are always in doubt as to how their stories might be interpreted by the law/prosecutors. If it is interpreted to have a negative meaning, for instance, the story could be considered as supporting the ideology of the so-called "terrorist groups", which would result in the journalists being fined and taken to jail (Informant 1 and 2, Personal interviews, April 2014). As such journalists prefer to stay safe rather than go to jail or live in exile. In so doing, most of the journalists prefer to either totally ignore or undertake heavy self-censorship while reporting sensitive issues, such as internal conflicts. The finding shows that journalists live under constant fear and heavily self-censor in reporting internal conflicts. This ultimately affects journalists' ability to exercise the right to freedom of expression that stated in the Constitution.

This fact is also articulated by exiled journalists. They accuse the government of enacting the anti-terrorism law to silence independent journalists/voices<sup>11</sup>. In addition to the newly passed law, the fear of being arrested has negatively affected their day-to-day activity, especially after the 2005 election. This has also been noted by the Reporters Without Borders (2013, p. 1-2) thus:

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<sup>10</sup> The Proclamation No. 652/2009, sub-article 6, states "Whosoever publishes or causes the publication of a statement that is likely to be understood by some or all of the members of the public to whom it is published as a direct or indirect encouragement or other inducement to them to the commission or preparation or instigation of an act of terrorism stipulated under Article 3 of this Proclamation is punishable with rigorous imprisonment from 10 to 20 years." <http://www.mfa.gov.et/docs/Anti-Terrorism%20Proclamation.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Betre Yacob, interviewed by Mail and Guardian Human Rights Watch, 2015, African's Best Read-Clampdown on Ethiopia's Independent media <http://mg.co.za/multimedia/2015-01-22-clamp-down-on-ethiopia-independent-media>.

Since the incident, journalists have had to endure harassment, intimidation and “official or unofficial warnings” not to cross redlines. Many journalists get discouraged, some are reduced to routinely censoring themselves and some end up fleeing the country.

*From Self-censoring to Total Silence*

As noted, one of the main challenges of the Ethiopian media is self-censorship, which is the withholding of one’s true opinion, facts, or some information from audiences/readers, which certainly limits the right of freedom of expression of the journalists. Commonly, self-censorship is a practice of omitting or hiding some parts or all information about the event or the interview for various reasons (Hayes, Glynn, & Shanahan, 2005). Self-censorship can be discussed into two ways. The first one is that journalists seem to be careful when they report issues related to social problems that are mostly politically sensitive, especially to the incumbent government (Tong, 2009). The second is that editors and reporters exclude some information in the editing process based on the overall goal of the newspaper (ibid). The latter seems more of professional news writing. As news writing is a selection of most important information or stories, the editorial prioritizes some and ignores the others. In this case, journalists omit or censor some of the information. In the case of self-censorship in the selected newspapers, however, editors and journalists exclude some critical issues from the story due to fear of government officials. It is essential to emphasize that self-censorship limits trustworthiness of the media, which ultimately worsens the future of the profession (Yesil, 2014). It affects the profession, which claims to serve the public by providing free, neutral, and balanced information objectively and fairly. In the meantime, it limits freedom of expression that is the fundamental right to citizens. As a result, it is described that self-censorship is jeopardizing the right to freedom of expression as well as the media professionals’ intervention in reporting issues freely (Yesil, 2014).

Overall, the current media climate still constrains the freedom of journalists in engaging with critical issues and forces them to exercise self-censorship, especially following government’s crackdown on the media in 2005 (Reporters Without Borders, 2013). In the current media situation, fear and self-censorship in the media are progressively getting worse. It appears that self-censorship among Ethiopian journalists has moved to a total silence, especially in the case of internal conflict reporting. This trend is particularly observed in relation to ethnic conflicts. While there have been numerous incidents of ethnic conflicts, the media have chosen to keep quiet. It can be argued that the Ethiopian media in general and the two newspapers in particular are playing safe to the detriment of both the public and the industry. The silence could be the way out from the overall challenges journalists face. However, it can be argued that the silence takes the Ethiopian media and the profession in the wrong direction. Freedom of expression, which has already deteriorated due to fear and self-censorship, is in jeopardy. The current trend of silence in the media has put its repercussion on the freedom of expression in the country in the condition, where one jumps from a frying pan to a fire.

### Conclusion

Although the right to freedom of expression, which is a universal and basic human right, is provided for citizens by the Ethiopian Constitution, journalists in the country live under fear while exercising this right, specifically in the case of reporting on internal conflicts. The intensity of the journalists' fear and the subsequent self-censorship has been widely, and perhaps, exceedingly observed on issues related to internal conflicts, in particular with, ethnic conflicts. The newspapers' overall under coverage of internal conflicts and their heavy dependence on external news agencies can be a reflection of journalists' fear and self-censorship. This situation appears to have led the media to shift from self-censoring to a silence. This phenomenon directly limits the society to get neutral information from the media with respect to internal conflicts. It also puts a question mark on the ability of the media in promoting freedom of expression since newspapers conceal some of the sensitive cases from the public.

### Notes

A special thanks to my supervisors Prof. Helge Rønning at Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, and Prof. Kristin S. Orgeret at Media studies, Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied for their feedbacks.

Also, thanks to Tewodros Hailemariam in translating the abstract and keywords into Franch.

Participants in the interviews

Informant 1 – a staff member at *The Daily Monitor*, April 14, 2014, at the office in Titu Hotel, in Addis Ababa

Informant 2 – a staff member at *The Daily Monitor*, April 13, 2014, at the office in the Titu Hotel, in Addis Ababa

Informant 3- a staff member at *The Ethiopian Herald*, MAy 30, 2014, in the office, in Addis Ababa

Informant 4- a staff member at *The Ethiopian Herald*, MAy 30, 2014, in the office, in Addis Ababa

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