

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Perplexity of Scholars: Media Relationships in Ethiopia: Exploring the Implications of the Democratization of the Nation

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Abstract

The role of media in democracy has been understood in terms of providing the general public with information on what the voters have for the public, how politicians behave, and how citizens increase their political participation. Scholars' media participation has been insignificant in the democratization process of Ethiopia despite its divergent interpretations in previous studies. Scholars' media participation in Ethiopia highly waning and waxing from time to time. Therefore, the objective of this exploratory research is to examine the intricate relationships between scholars and media in Ethiopia. The research is mainly qualitative: Sixteen key informants were interviewed from both media people and public-scholars. And three FGDs were held with journalists and public-scholars. The findings have shown that the scholar-media relationship has been weakening because of the following major factors: media credibility went down, there are abusive uses of scholars' opinions and expressions by the media, there is intolerance of criticisms by the government, and thus polarized political ideologies have been practiced by many scholars and the media.

Keywords: Media participation, public - scholars, democratization, journalist

Introduction

This research attempts to investigate the nature of the relationship between public scholars and the media, and its implication on the democratization process of Ethiopia. The term scholar is often used to refer to those individuals with a university education. Scholar is thus "a person who has studied a subject for a long time and knows a lot about it: an intelligent and well-educated person who knows a particular subject very well" (Merriam Webster Dictionary). Both terms – 'scholar' and 'public scholars'– are interchangeably used in this paper.. The term scholar is conceptualized as a "popularizer or participant in public discourse, expert in relationships with clients, and member of a disciplinary institution" (Kalleberg, 2008, p.22). We therefore use the term public scholars or scholars to refer to writers, politicians, teachers, and artists who have been contributing knowledge to the lay people outside of the specialty and are able to influence the public agenda with active media participation.

The study is, therefore, conducted with a view that scholars have greater impact on the democratic culture of a nation state. In line with this argument, Chomsky (1967) noted, "intellectuals have the power that comes from political liberty, access to information and freedom of expression" (p. 2).

Ethiopia is one of the countries with its distinctive history and tradition (Nigussie, 2010, pp. 74 -75). Like many African countries, Ethiopia was ruled by feudal kings and dic-

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tatorial regimes for ages. However, the country made some rough entry into multiparty politics since the fall of the Derg Regime in the early 1990s. Since then, Ethiopia adopted “democracy”, federalism, and free market as key elements of the structure of government system (Nigussie, 2010). As democracy cannot be built overnight, “the entire democratization process of the country led to crisis” (Abbink, 2006, p.173). One of the reasons for the occurrence of political crisis is the distance between the rulers and the ruled that has increased to remarkable proportions (Abbink, 2006, p.197). Another reason that confirms the existence of a crisis is “all public protests were suppressed with violent means and mass arrest of opponents and opposition party members” (Ibid).

Even though many scholars agree on the basics of democracy, they give different meaning to the term democratization. For instance, Nafziger (2006), and Jebril, Stetka and Mathew (2013) identified the following three basic considerations when discussing the process of democratization. First, democratization is about moving a nation from authoritarian rules to democratic rules although the process is not fully completed within certain duration of time. Second, it includes the promotion of civil society and independent institutions; such as, labor unions, religious organizations, educational and scientific communities, the media, networks of social trust, and other kinds of NGOs. Third, the process of democratization also consists of institutional change, political involments and regime change. This research, thus, focuses on the networks of social trust and media participation as both are supposed to be the major factors to influence public – scholars and media interaction and coordination.

Journalism and democracy have been historically closely linked for centuries. As Josephi (2017, p. 495) writes, “[t]he media are seen as essential instruments in letting citizens know about their country’s affairs and in enabling them to make informed choices in elections between competing parties and candidates.” In representative democracies, the media have normative functions of serving as a forum of encouraging pluralistic debate, protecting citizens against the abuse of power, and mobilizing agent encouraging public learning and participation in the political process (Jebril, et al., 2013). From this, we can understand that the citizen–media relationship is more than being a source of audience to the media. In other words, one cannot only act as information provider or information recipient. Both citizens and media would influence the overall development of democratic culture. Thus, citizen–media relationships have to be examined so as to cultivate their roles to mutually build a democratic culture of the state.

Political participation is a key to democratize a nation state. Accordingly, the participation of citizens in the media can be pertinent to build political participation in particular and democracy in general. Still, cultural and democratic factors pose great challenges for scholars who are less concerned about participating in politics through media (Kellner, n.d, para. 4). On the other hand, there have been signs of growing interest from the news media to build relationships with public scholars since the 1980s (Semir, 2000, p.125). Nevertheless, it is not clear whether the interest of the media at the time was to present the scholars’ genuine point of views on different issues or to use them to further the political agenda of the government. Obviously, media use them as expert sources with the public, and scholars have in turn become actors and topics of media production for long periods of time. So, the interaction between scholars and media are inevitable as scholars are expected to have active media participation than the ordinary citizen to influence public life. Eliaeson and Kalleberg (2008, p.5) identified two main roles of public scholars as “disseminator (‘popularizer’) of scientific knowledge in different cultural contexts and as a debater in democratic public discourses.” Thus, there should be strong public scholars’ participation in the media because “misinformation and lack of knowledge can distort

democratic discourses” (Eliaeson & Kalleberg, 2008, p.17).

Scholars’ media participation is vital for the formation of democratic culture. The aim of encouraging scholars to participate in the media is “to get new issues and to influence public agenda, to strengthen the rationality in cultural reproduction and contribute to deliberative-democratic discourses” (Kalleberg, 2008, p.6). A ‘deformed civic consciousness’ and ‘distorted public agendas’ are among the problems faced by citizens in pluralist democracies (Dahl, 1982 as cited in Kalleberg, 2008).

In general, this paper attempts to investigate the existing relationship between public scholars and media in line with the conditions and determinants of democratization process in Ethiopia. There are various methodological approaches to investigate the interaction and coordination of media actors, but we focus on the conditions that determine democratization, looking for domestic factors that have likely implication on democratization.

Statement of the problem

The purpose of this research is to investigate the nature of relationship between public scholars and media, and its implication on the democratization process of Ethiopia. Investigating the nature of relationships between scholars and the media is a result of constant observation and experience of scholars’ silence, fear and reluctance to respond to the media’s request, especially for interviews. This could partly attribute to situations where public scholars who actively and strongly opposed and criticized the ruling party have been thrown into jail, for there is a situation of zero tolerance and only one dominant political party controls the nation. Indeed, almost all seats of the parliament have been occupied by members of the ruling party even if there are many other political parties in the country. The presence of one party, one parliament within multilingual and multi-cultural society, surely marginalizes the needs and interests of many and also ignores their views. “Lack of a sustained democratic political culture, and dedicated civil service, and the lack of democratic institutions” are challenges that should be dealt with at the national level (Temesgen, 2009, p.152). Other studies have also shown that the media in Ethiopia were used only for satisfying the wishes and whims of the government (Gudeta, 2008; Nigussie, 2010). They were also used only for disseminating government’s agendas (Tikikel, 2007). Thus, scholars may become less interested in the media and may not be disposed to politics. So, the aforementioned problems would influence the activities of the media as institution as independent forum for alternative views of scholars. Exploring the nature of relationships between scholars and the media and their implications on the contribution of democratization process is, therefore, worthwhile and pertinent.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

- What is the nature of the relationship between public scholars and the media?
- How strong is public scholars’ participation in the media?
- What is the implication of the relationship between the two actors on the democratization process of Ethiopia?

Theoretical Framework

There are four models of democracy that are applicable to the media: competitive democracy, procedural democracy, participatory democracy and deliberative democracy (Stromback, 2005). However, since the coming of EPDRF to power, the Ethiopian government has been following a self-designated form of democracy, namely, revolutionary democracy. Many scholars claim that this kind of political ideology is not only “ambiguous” (Bach, 2011, p.656), but also proved to be “difficult for outsiders to understand” (Vaughan, 2011, p. 619). This is partly because only little is written about it and its meaning and significance have been in constant shift (Vaughan, 2011). As a matter of fact, there is very little theoretical foundation on the ideological perceptions of revolutionary democracy. However, it is also redefined in ways that it both “rejects and endorses” liberalism (Bach, 2011, p. 656). Although it attempts to allow multiparty democracy, the dominant party at the center proved to be intolerant of political criticism. Because of this, the EPDRF is described by observers as a party that is “not inclined to sharing or giving up power” making its revolutionary democracy ideology “exclusivist and authoritarian” (Abbink, 2017, p.2). EPDRF’s revolutionary democracy now has become the subject of strong contention with it polarizing arguments in a number of ways (Bach, 2011; Merera, 2011; Hagmann & Abbink, 2011; Aalen & Tronvoll, 2009).

The theoretical framework of this study, therefore, is drawn from the premise of both participatory and deliberative models of democracy. From this theoretical framework, it is possible to understand that democracy is a value-laden political system which needs political equality, participation, tolerance and fairness. These forms of democracy allow public scholars or others to freely participate in available platforms. Thus, scholars and media have to cooperate and develop strong working relationships to foster trust, integrity, tolerance and other values of democracy in the larger society. In addition, democracy can succeed when people participate in public life and engage in different political course of action at various social settings. It is believed that the ultimate objective of democracy is to make informed decisions which can be advanced through discussion in the public sphere including media.

Methodology

This study explores the nature of interaction between media and public scholars and its implication on the democratization process of the country, using qualitative approach. The advantage of qualitative methods in exploratory research is its usage of open-ended questions and probing which give participants the opportunity to respond in their own words (Mack, Woodson, Macqueen, Guest & Namey, 2005). This kind of research is also designed when there is limited investigation and a small number of informants. To collect the necessary data, we used key informants including public scholars and journalists as the main targets of this study. We employed a snowball sampling technique to get better informants to examine the interaction between media and scholars. Moreover, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used as data gathering tools. Eighteen public scholars and eight journalists participated in three FGDs. The minimum participants in the FGDs were eight and the maximum were nine, including university professors, artists, writers and politicians. Journalists were taken purposively from both public and private media in the broadcast that have national coverage and, in the print, large circulation. Also, eight scholars and eight journalists were interviewed. Thematic analysis was employed to code, categorize and interpret the data that are gathered.

Results and Discussions

Working Relationship

The relationships between media and scholars have been the determining factors for the cultivation of democracy, and when we see these relationships on the surface in Ethiopia context, the media seems working with scholars of different professional backgrounds. However, one of the informants is from a news editor of the local radio who believes that scholars who are currently participating in the state's media are 'opportunists'. As he further explained "while the scholars were expected to work for the interest of the public, those scholars who are participating in the state media are working to further their personal interest and are morally incapacitated. Indeed, they are opportunists who look for assignments in different higher government positions" (Personal Interview, March 17, 2017). Another informant, who is a lecturer at Addis Ababa University stated that media is left for ordinary people and scholars who regularly contribute to the media are very few in number. Most of the participants of the FGDs also agreed that the media lost their credibility in the eyes of the public. This implies that the media's relationship with those scholars who stand up for the interest of the public and who want to execute their intellectual responsibility is weak. Thus, the working relationship between the media and scholars is highly cumbersome.

Scholars' Media Participation

Most of the informants stated that scholars' participation in the current media platform is very poor. Even though there are few scholars who regularly participate in the media, considering the number of scholars we have in the country, participants of the FGDs confirmed that the level of scholars' participation is so poor. There are many reasons for their low participation. One of the informants who is a reporter related the issue of limited participation with the historical event of '*Qey Shibir*' literally translated as 'Red Terror', a period which lasted two years from March 1975 to February 1977 (Gebru, 2008). Red Terror, a revolutionary violence carried out by the *Derg* (council or committee) regime, was marked with fratricidal killings and widespread disappearances and torture in which many victims were young and educated (Gebru, 2008; Wiebel, 2017). Because of this devastating event that took place in the late 1970s, many scholars do not like to take part in the media and public discourse. Many of the victims of the Red Terror were scholars, and that the fear-effect still holds the current scholars back from participating in the media. Similarly, Wiebel (2017, p.15) stated "many citizens, bereaved or scarred following the Red Terror, chose to retreat into private spheres and to eschew any political activism." This illustrates the effect of Red Terror on scholars' participation in the media. Also, another informant who is an author of books strengthens this by saying that scholars lack the confidence to freely express their idea to the media as a result of fear of the horrible measures taken by the previous and current regimes.

Another fear which was stated by the participants of the FGDs is that both the state and the private media are polarized: the private media acts as "grave tellers" while the state media acts as "development harbinger." In this regard, one of our informants who is a professor, said:

Scholars categorize the media as supporter of the government and/or against the government. Scholars who thought of themselves in favor of the government have a hard time expressing their ideas to those media that are against the government. Scholars who are against the government have also a hard

time expressing their thoughts on state and private media for fearing to be labeled as oppositions to the state (Personal Interview, March 02, 2017).

Additionally, another scholar who is a lecturer of Journalism claimed that the media abusively frame the scholars' ideas and views to meet their own political purposes. For instance, when a journalist interviews a scholar at a certain time and for certain purpose, they will quote parts of the same interview that fit their political context and consumption. Therefore, scholars refrain from giving interviews and working with the media because they frequently get mis-framed or misquoted by the media. Furthermore, an informant who is a professor of linguistics and a freelancer of the defunct *Fitih* Newspaper stated that scholars participate in the media by criticizing government policies and interests, and they try to address the interest of the public. When these contravene with the interests of the government, government affiliated media engage in campaigning activities that defame and label scholars as agents of opposition political parties or a subversive of development. And the government has zero tolerance to such criticisms.

Moreover, another informant, who is a PhD candidate about the lack of scholars' engagement in the media said:

There are scholars who are silent because they believe they got tired of saying same thing over and over again. You know... they do research and present their findings to the media, but they come to conclude that why speak when no one listens. For instance, when *Shager FM Chewata* Program's host presents renowned scholars, you can see the people listening to the program fanatically. And when the scholars are asked why they didn't raise such issues that they are raising now at the radio program before, they say no one listens (Personal Interview, March 10, 2017).

All informants of our study stated that media and scholars are greatly responsible for the democratization process of the country. For example, one of the informants argued that scholars' media participations can shape, contribute and promote democratic culture of a country. He stated:

It is comfortable, without a doubt, to create a community free from emotiveness not by guess but by research. It might be difficult to say that all researches are right all the time but they might be a cause for people to raise questions and to seek answers. They play a great role for democracy, new ideas and civilizations. Shortly, having scholars participate in the media mean writing a prescription for a sick country same way as a doctor does to a patient. They know the disease and the cure; the government needs to put them to good use (Personal Interview, March 10, 2017).

Moreover, it is evident that scholars' contribution to democracy when the country is in crisis is highly relevant. This means the goal of the relationship between scholars and the media is to find solution to common problems. To quote the words of one of the informants regarding his hopes for the coordination and collaboration of scholars with media when the country is at crisis: He asserted:

Yes, I think scholars collaborate with the media at times when the country faces problems. For instance, with the recent civil disobedience in some parts of the country, scholars like Dr. Dagnachew Assefa, Dr. Bedilu Wakjira, Professor Ahmed Zekarias, Professor Mesifin W/Mariam and others have written as to what should be done. So, these different scholars are providing solution for existing problems, criticizing the wrong doings of the people and the government and suggesting way outs that are better for the people and the future of the country which indicate the nature of relationship of scholars with media (Personal Interview, March 10, 2017).

Therefore, we can deduce that the level of scholars' participations in the media differ for reasons stated above. But it is believed that their active participation will highly contribute to the cultivation of democracy. All our informants and discussants agreed that scholars have multiple roles as experts, sources, debaters of public affairs, cultivators of democracy, popularizers of new ideas, and translators of technical knowledge. In addition, scholars, by originating ideas that people relate to, play the role of arbitrator thereby to connect generation with generation, eon with eon, and government with people.

Challenges

All our informants and discussants in the study agreed that interest, motivation and knowledge are key factors to build better working relationships between scholars and media. In line with this, journalists claimed that scholars are not interested to work with the media, and the scholars feel vice versa (FGDs, 2017). One of the reasons provided by journalists for scholars' limited interest to work with the media is that scholars think the current media is unfit to them. So instead of using the media to disseminate their research findings, innovations and viewpoints, they have been undermining the media (FGDs, 2017). On the contrary, journalists are mostly not interested to work with scholars, for the reason that they focus on interviewing popular figures such as artists or actors instead of scholars (FGDs, 2017). Because in order to interview a scholar, the journalist has to know the scholar's profile, know his or her work, and do a lot of research. As journalists do not want to put much effort in this respect, they would prefer to interview an artist who just released his or her first song (FGDs, 2017).

Moreover, most of our scholar informants thought that journalists lack knowledge about scholars, lack research skills and have ethical problems. For instance, an informant who is a PhD student at Addis Ababa University and a writer claimed the following:

The journalists are unable to find out about the scholars' work and unaware of scholars. In some places I hear journalists saying zealously.... Oh ... we do have such a scholar or a scientist. This means that they do not know them. Even the government itself, when celebrating their ruling party's inception, the officials always allow the artists to involve in the ceremony, but not the scholars. Thus, there is an intention of promoting artists more important than scholars for the country (Personal interview, March 10, 2017).

Informants also claimed that the media do not open their door for scholars to discuss societal problems (FGDs, 2017). One of our informants who is a professor of political science at Addis Ababa University said, "The media is gagging and oppressive as is the case especially in Ethiopia Broadcast Corporation, party affiliated media like Walta Information Center, Fana Broadcast Corporation, and so on. An informant who is an editor of Addis Zemen Newspaper also claimed that the private media are better than the state-owned ones in opening their doors". An informant who is a media manager at Amhara Mass Media stated that most media do not have editorial policy that incorporates scholars' participation in their different program formats.

Conclusion

Different literatures indicate that Ethiopian scholars have greater impact on Ethiopian politics. For example, Bahru (2002) stated that most of foreign educated intellectuals forwarded corrective suggestions for social, political and cultural problems of the country because many were exposed to western education and democracy. Bahru (2002) also indicated that many of them were asking the government to take political reform and to

establish constitutional government, and they had huge role in transforming the country from feudalism to socialism and then from socialism to democratic political system. Of course, the role they played in recommending and publishing scientific findings to prosper democratic culture in the country is well understood.

Whereas from the findings of the study, we can conclude that the relationship between scholars and media lacks reciprocity. And scholars' participation in media is very low. The media, in general, and journalists, in particular, have limited knowledge about scholars, limited research skills, lack of credibility and lack of ethical discipline. Also, the media does not have an organized guideline (editorial policy) which states different contexts in participating with scholars. The study also affirmed that scholars' media participation has a strong implication to cultivate a democratic culture. However, the media is not allowing scholars to take part in such endeavors.

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