

Journalists or activists? Self-identity in the Ethiopian diaspora online community

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of the diaspora online media as stakeholders in the transnational Ethiopian media landscape. Through content analysis of selected websites and interviews with editors, the research discusses how the sites relate to recognized journalistic ideals and how the editors view themselves in regard to journalistic professionalism. It is argued that the journalistic ideals of the diaspora media must be understood towards the particular political conditions in homeland Ethiopia. Highly politicized, the diaspora websites display a marked critical attitude towards the Ethiopian government through an activist journalism approach. The editors differ slightly among themselves in the perception of whether activist journalism is in conflict with ideal-type professional norms, but they justify the practice either because of the less than ideal conditions back home or because they maintain that the combination of activism and professionalism is a forward-looking journalism ideology. The online initiatives of the Ethiopian diaspora are found to prolong media contestations in the homeland as well as reinforcing an ideal-type professional journalism paradigm.

Keywords

Activist journalism, diaspora online media, Ethiopia, hybrid journalism, journalism identity, professionalism

Introduction

Much African media production does not take place on the African continent, but overseas. The people behind this production usually belong to the African diaspora, in other words they represent Africans abroad who maintain ties with their country of origin. The concerned media operation is largely made possible by the use of Internet technology, witnessed by the remarkable growth of Africa-related material in global online media channels. Yunusa Ya'u (2008) contends that more online content about Africa is being produced by Africans abroad than within the continent itself.

The growth in diasporic media channels invites a fundamental discussion of the boundaries of journalism. Evidently, many of the managers of diaspora websites are not professional journalists in the common Western sense of the term. They may not belong to established media houses, they have not been educated as journalists, they are rarely members of a professional media organization, their main occupation is something else than the media venture, and so forth. Yet they are occupied with something that *looks like* journalism. Where should these actors be placed in relation to journalism as an occupation and profession? Are they journalists, are they activists, or are they something else? Furthermore, the very nature of diaspora media channels provokes a slightly different ground for discussing journalistic professionalism than do similar hybrid media channels in the technologically advanced world. In the West, scholars continue to discuss to what extent the rise of new media formats signifies a new journalism paradigm, perhaps indicating a counter-reaction to decades of steady course towards increased professionalization in

journalism (Deuze, 2005; Knight, 2008; Wiik, 2009). However, online media instigated by actors in the diaspora contain certain features that provide a slightly different platform for discussion. Diasporic media channels of the kind analysed in this study are distinct in at least three regards: They are usually aggravated by less fortunate conditions in the homeland; they provide a vivid perspective on translocation in the usually extreme span between content producers and local audience markets; and the concerned websites are often produced by persons who were media practitioners under vastly different conditions on the public arena back home. This opens up for an interesting enquiry of whether journalism ideology is primarily attached to the medium, to the surrounding society, or to the persons behind the media content.

The focus in this study is on the Ethiopian digital diaspora, with particular attention on some of the most popular websites, which concentrate on Ethiopian news and debate. Editors from nine such websites were interviewed, and a slightly higher number of websites were followed over a period of two years. The research is ultimately focusing on the occupational identities of the managers/editors. Even if they are not all full-time workers with the media undertakings, they spend a considerable amount of time writing for and managing the websites. They feel strongly for their particular website, and it represents – in the case of the websites in this study – more than a business opportunity. Towards this background, I'm asking where the editors place themselves in relation to journalism professionalism, both as expressed through the websites and in their own words.

The theoretical framework to be used acknowledges a tension between a traditional journalism paradigm focusing on media workers as professionals and an alternative paradigm foregrounding citizen participation and breakdown of old media hierarchies through the impact of new media technology (e.g. Lowrey, 2006; Domingo et al, 2008; Reich, 2008; Kperogi, 2011). In this regard, research on the influence of new media practices on journalism ideology yield different and, it would seem, slightly contradictory conclusions. On the one hand, there has been acclaim to the idea that new media approaches have the potential to fundamentally change journalism practice (Gillmor, 2004; Wall, 2005); on the other hand, when studying actual media practice, mainstream media appear to be reluctant to give up their professional hegemony (Paulussen et al., 2007; Singer, 2010; Lewis, Kaufhold and Lasorsa, 2010). Less researched, however, are the possible reorientations in professional conceptions among media workers who completely change their physical surroundings as well as their media platform, such as in the case of journalists leaving their home society and entering a diaspora community. A possible hypothesis in this regard would be that journalists who used to live in an oppressive media environment but now benefit from a free atmosphere with new media opportunities transform not only their working methods but their ideological approach to journalism altogether. This would make sense because the new media environment made possible by online platforms provides them with far better opportunities to promote citizen involvement and push for political change than the limited media space back home did – and the research data in this study do confirm that political change is an essential motive for their journalistic efforts. However, this focused study of the Ethiopian Internet sphere suggests that the new situation does not bring a substantial change to the content producers' journalism ideology. They continue to favour a journalism approach which defines them as a professional community largely in contrast to citizen-driven, participatory journalism initiatives. At the same time, the digital platform gives the editors a chance to encourage reader participation through discussion forums and other types of responses, which are indeed widely used, but still with the preconception that there exists a professional distance between the journalists/editors and their audience.

Research on African diasporas and new media channels

Interest in the study of diasporas has grown rapidly since the early 2000s. A large portion of the research has focused on integration issues and the diaspora as an evolving community in the host country, including perspectives on media behaviour (e.g. Ogunyemi, 2006; 2007), but there is also a growing body of research concentrating on the ties between the diaspora and the country of origin (e.g. Moyo, 2009; Willems and Mano, 2010), and the ensuing potential of the diaspora to serve as agents of change for the homeland. Research has suggested that the diaspora is often a resourceful and innovative community, having the potential to positively affect peace processes (Mohamoud and Osman, 2008; Kadende-Kaiser, 2003), contribute to economic development (De Haas, 2006; Horst, 2008), and promote good governance (Brinkerhoff, 2008; 2009) for the country of origin. As of late, however, there has also been increasing attention to the possibly destabilizing role that the diaspora may play for homeland conditions. The Somali diaspora, for example, has been found to exert a dual impact on its people, one of which is an extension of clan-based conflicts into the international community (Issa-Salwe, 2006; Kleist, 2008; Fallis, 2009). Studying Ethiopia, Lyons (2007) explains this extraterritorial prolonging of conflict by means of traits of so-called 'conflict-generated diasporas', who in his opinion 'tend to be less willing to compromise and therefore reinforce and exacerbate the protractedness of homeland conflicts' (p 529).

The increased engagement in transnational politics by the diaspora is largely a result of opportunities created by new media technology, particularly the Internet. In the view of Annabelle Sreberny (2001), the Internet is 'the diasporic medium par excellence' (p 156). It is cheap and fast, and makes contact with the home country a lot easier than just a few years ago. It has also enabled small groups, sometimes down to the individual person level, to create media outlets with potentially large audiences, often with far better legal and logistical opportunities than in the homeland. Some researchers suggest that a new transnational public sphere has thus emerged, demonstrated for example by diasporic Eritreans who rearticulate national values on the web (Bernal, 2006) and Zimbabweans who resist state propaganda by means of alternative media channels of the digital diaspora (Moyo, 2007; Ndlela, 2009).

The growth of African diaspora websites feeds into the discussion of media professionalism as well. To this end, various analysts convincingly argue that diaspora media channels should be regarded as journalistic products on par with other media ventures in Africa, yet they occupy a new and distinct role in the continent's media ecology. First, diaspora media tend to be provoked by repressive or less-than-ideal conditions at home. Second, the outlets represent an alternative to traditional media outlets both in terms of content and purpose. Third, online media channels significantly expand the potential audience base. These preconditions lead to a different approach to professional practice and possibly also an alternative understanding of journalistic self-perception, as indicated by several studies focusing on African diaspora media. Dumisani Moyo (2007), for example, attributes the existence of many Zimbabwean news sites in the diaspora directly to the repressive media situation at home. Immediately after the closure of *The Daily News* and three other private newspapers in 2003, a mushrooming of diaspora news sites followed. Moyo applies alternative media theory (Hamilton, 2000; Atton, 2002; Banda, 2006) in the analysis of the Zimbabwean sites, and concludes that they constitute alternative public spheres in the sense that they provide a second space for citizen access and participation. Moyo is here in agreement with similar studies from Zimbabwe (Ndlela, 2009), Eritrea (Bernal, 2006), and Somalia (Auld, 2007), all of which represent conflict-ridden societies, and all of which argue that diaspora websites mark a significant step forward in expanding people participation and empowerment. At the same time, Moyo (2007) points to the vast variety of diaspora web endeavours among the Zimbabwean diaspora. Some are amateurish, while others are indeed well financed, properly organized and highly proficient, thus

challenging Hamilton's (2000) portrayal of alternative media as de-capitalized, de-organised and de-professionalized.

That the diaspora media have an effect on media operations in the homeland is underscored by Farooq A. Kperogi's (2008) close study of the local Nigerian media after the rapid growth of country-related news sites on the Internet. Today, newspapers in Nigeria persistently look to the Internet and rely on diaspora media for news and information. On several occasions, the diaspora media have been able to set the agenda in Nigerian politics and have prompted the local government to react officially on accounts of corruption and other issues. Kperogi suggests that this phenomenon is an example of a new kind of counter-flow of news which puts into question the binary between a domestic public sphere and a diasporic public sphere. In labelling the type of journalism performed by the diaspora and its local 'correspondents' on ground in Nigeria, Kperogi employs the term 'guerrilla journalism', which was previously associated with courageous, uncompromising advocacy journalism used by sections of the media in Nigeria in the 1990s while the military dictatorship was still in office. The pertinent question to ask is why it took a diaspora to reinstate this type of journalistic practice. Is there something about the character of the diaspora that triggers alternative journalistic thinking? Or is there something about the nature of the medium - the Internet? An examination of the Ethiopian diaspora and its utilization of online media channels may shed some light on these issues.

The Ethiopian diaspora has various similarities with other African diasporas. It has emerged from different waves of emigration coinciding with political changes in the homeland and is as such one of several 'conflict-generated diasporas' on the continent (Lyons, 2007). The first significant wave of emigrants from Ethiopia came with the emergence of the military Dergue regime in the early 1970s which provoked royalists from the preceding empire to flee the country. As the Dergue (r. 1974-91) strengthened its grip on Ethiopian society in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a new wave of emigrants followed. The last major wave of emigrants came in the 1990s after EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) seized power, and one may also speak of a smaller wave of emigrants after the 2005 national elections upshot. The website editors interviewed for this study have all left Ethiopia during the reign of the current EPRDF government, most of whom left the country after 2000. Although most of these editors, as well as most other Ethiopian diaspora media actors, are situated in North America and Western Europe, there is also a considerable Ethiopian diaspora constituency in surrounding African countries, notably Sudan and Kenya (Levine, 2004).

Conditions for media operations in Ethiopia

It is the argument of this article that online media activities of the Ethiopian diaspora ought to be explained with respect to the adverse conditions for journalistic operations in homeland Ethiopia, thus the need for some insight into the media situation of the country. The media scene in Ethiopia is largely state-dominated, though less than it used to be. Most journalists, estimated at 80%, work for state media institutions. After the government opened the airwaves for private actors in 2006, four FM stations have been licensed - but their reach is mainly confined to the capital city of Addis Ababa. Independent TV licences have not yet been announced. Private newspapers have been on the market since the overthrow of the military Dergue regime in 1991, but the industry has been challenged by frequent establishments and closings. Journalistically speaking, the press has been characterized by sensational reporting, political leanings and uneven quality (Shimelis, 2002; Skjerdal and Hallelujah, 2009), though the period since 2005 has seen tendencies towards a more steady newspaper market structure and sober reporting - largely as a result of the government's successful efforts to get rid of what it regards as disturbing voices, one must add.

The limited opportunity for independent voices (i.e. non-government affiliated ones) to get access to the Ethiopian public arena has been duly noted in reports and research literature. After a few years of the newspaper industry blooming following the democratic government's takeover in 1991, the authorities began to clamp down on journalistic activity. By 1996, Ethiopia had become the country in Africa with the most frequent imprisonments of media workers (Kerina, 1996). Journalists began to flee the country. Many did however remain in the country and continued to produce publications that annoyed the authorities to varying degrees. During the national election campaign in 2005, there was a feeling of newfound openness in the media with a variety of voices and publications on the scene, boldly supporting the causes of various opposition groups. The post-election period ended in violent turmoil, however, and many actors, including 14 editors and publishers, were arrested. In reality, this forced the closing of a range of publications, and the number of newspapers dropped from 85 to 51 in less than a year (Mekuria, 2005; Kibnesh, 2006). Interestingly enough, the government lost the court case against the detained media workers, but by the time the final verdict was proclaimed, almost two years had lapsed. The powerful ruling coalition had successfully communicated that dissident reporting is not tolerated in Ethiopia (cf Wondwosen, 2009).

The latest developments in the Ethiopian media situation include a new media law (2008) and a new broadcasting law (2007), both of which – despite rumours of the contrary – represent a formal liberalization of media opportunities in the country. For example, the media law repeals licensing statutes of newspapers and introduces an access to information bill only third in Africa after Uganda and South Africa.¹ Moreover, the government has started with weekly press briefings for all sections of the media and bi-monthly press conferences with the prime minister – indeed a rare phenomenon in Africa; and the country saw in 2010 the formal beginnings of a media council initiated by the media organizations themselves. Despite these tendencies towards professionalization and liberalization, the government continues to have a firm grip on most aspects of media communication in Ethiopia. Television broadcasting is state-run and is characterized by a nation-building agenda and uncontroversial protocol news. Journalists both in the private and state media execute habitual self-censorship in place of official censorship, which has been prohibited since 1992 (Skjerdal, 2008). The impact of alternative voices through private radio is limited as these stations primarily serve the four million inhabitants of Addis Ababa up against the total 80-million population in the country.

The population has nevertheless had a media alternative for many years in the shortwave services of Voice of America (VOA) and Deutsche Welle (DW) – much to the dismay of the Ethiopian government, which asserts that the stations, particularly VOA and its Amharic service, are staffed with oppositional Ethiopians in the diaspora. VOA reported that their Amharic transmissions were interrupted on Ethiopian land during the 2005 national elections; during the 2008 local elections; and again in March 2010 during the campaigning for the latest national elections in May 2010. Ethiopian authorities, however, consistently denied that they had anything to do with the interruption. 'This is a baseless allegation. The government doesn't espouse a policy of restricting media outlets from disseminating their messages to Ethiopian audiences,' said state minister Shimelis Kemal in the Office for Government Communication Affairs (Heinlein, 4 March 2010). Two weeks after, however, prime minister Meles Zenawi admitted in his bi-monthly press conference that the government had 'for some time' been testing jamming equipment with the view to interrupt shortwave broadcasts if deemed necessary (McLure, 19 March 2010). That the Ethiopian government went open with its censoring tactics served to confirm the suspicion of many that there existed one official media policy on paper and another one under the table.

Ethiopian authorities have also been accused of blocking websites. In May 2006, one year after the national elections, reports came from various sources that specific websites were inaccessible in the country. The websites concerned were all critical news channels edited by Ethiopians in the diaspora, plus Blogspot.com, a host site which contains a number of critical blogs on Ethiopian politics. The government once again denied any censoring, but government-critical sites continued to be inaccessible and further investigation put in doubt the official explanation. Tests by the OpenNet Initiative pointed towards centralized IP filtering by the national and only Internet service provider Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation (Faris and Villeneuve, 2008; Klement, 2009). In the report, Ethiopia came out as the only Sub-Saharan country besides Sudan to use Internet filtering together with a number of Middle East and Asian countries. The filtering in Ethiopia was found to have political rather than social and security motivations. The government's refusal to accept responsibility for the Internet blocking paralleled the response of information minister Bereket Simon to the interruption of the SMS service in the post-election period in June 2005. He first denied the government's involvement in it, but later admitted it was done to prevent ethnically-based gatherings and turmoil (Bereket Simon, personal interview, 10 May 2010). These cases indicate a government ready to step in and interfere with the media 'when necessary', as well as a national leadership which prefers informal rather than formal means of controlling media communication.

One last case which has direct relevance for the later discussion concerns the closing of the weekly newspaper *Addis Neger* in November 2009. Established in September 2007, *Addis Neger* (literally 'new things') soon grew to become one of the most popular newspapers with the Ethiopian public. *Addis Neger* had a strong commentary profile and carried lengthy analytical articles about politics and contemporary issues. The political identification of the newspaper remained largely undetermined, but the fact that one of the editors had campaigned for the opposition party CUD (Coalition for Unity and Democracy) in 2005 as well as *Addis Neger's* critical reporting on the party in power meant that key persons within the ruling coalition began to see the newspaper as an opponent. The suspicion was ultimately expressed in critical commentary articles in the state-run daily *Addis Zemen* and the government-friendly website Aigaforum.com which linked *Addis Neger* to terrorist interests. The articles were not signed, which is customary in controversial exchanges in Ethiopia, but it was commonly assumed that key persons close to the ruling party coalition EPRDF were behind them. To the editors of *Addis Neger*, the commentaries were evidence that the government was preparing a legal process against the newspaper based on the new anti-terror proclamation that had been promulgated by the state on 28 August 2009. The editors found it hazardous to stay in the local printing business any longer and left the country without prior notice after publishing the last edition of *Addis Neger* on 28 November 2009 (Mesfin, 2010).

Addis Neger, however, was eventually transformed into an online diaspora media channel to be launched just before the latest national elections in May 2010 (Addisnegeronline.com). With a strong focus on politics in the homeland, *Addis Neger* online is representative of the websites treated in this study. They combine news and views, involve a variety of sources and contributors, and invite reader participation. They also promote themselves as an alternative to journalism performed in mainland Ethiopia, seeing themselves as a counterpart to practices of self-censorship and a local journalism culture induced by fear (Skjerdal, 2010).

Method and theoretical framework

The research data in the study are mainly generated from interviews with editors/managers of selected Ethiopian diaspora websites, plus a longitudinal reading of the same sites as well as two additional sites which are significant in the Ethiopian diaspora media scene

(Ethiopianreview.com and Nazret.com). Situated in various cities in Europe, North America and Africa, the website editors were interviewed using a combination of telephone conversation, e-mail and online chatting. The interviews were conducted between February 2009 and September 2010, in other words both before and after the May 2010 elections in homeland Ethiopia. In general, elections bear particular significance for the nature and profile of diaspora websites because these are the periods when political concerns are especially augmented in the public discourse. Thus, four of the selected websites were a direct outcome of the post-election turmoil of 2005. All nine websites except Mahder (closed October 2010) are still on the market and as such signal a certain stability for the chosen media products.

Table 1: Websites selected for the study

URL	Mainly edited from	Started
www.addisnegeronline.com	Kampala, Uganda	May 2010
www.ethioforum.org	Amsterdam, Netherlands	June 2005
www.ethiogermany.de	Frankfurt, Germany	June 2005
www.ethioguardian.com	Amsterdam, Netherlands	Oct 2006
www.ethiomedia.com	Everett, WA, USA	Nov 2002
www.ethiomunich.com	Munich, Germany	March 2007
www.ethioquestnews.com	Toronto, Canada	Sept 2002
www.ethiosun.com	Alexandria, VA, USA	May 2005
www.mahder.com	Brussels, Belgium	Aug 2005

The websites were selected mainly on three criteria: focus area (Ethiopian current affairs), newsworthiness (regular updates), and audience appeal (likely to attract a fairly wide readership)². Apart from these criteria, the sites represent a certain diversity in style and political inclination, although they may all be found to carry a large amount of material critical to the present Ethiopian government – contrasting, for example, with Aigaforum.com, which is the dominant pro-government alternative on the world wide web.

Traffic statistics on the sites are difficult to determine, but it is evident that some of the outlets in the study are among the most popular websites specializing on Ethiopian issues. Ethiomedia claims to have 40,000 hits (page-views) a day, which probably makes it the second largest Ethiopia-related site on the Internet. The most popular site is another diaspora website, Nazret.com, which may attract as many as 100 daily reader comments on hot issues. Most websites which are managed from the Ethiopian mainland rank significantly lower on traffic statistics, with the private newspaper *Reporter's* website as the most popular, ranked after five diaspora websites. Interestingly enough, however, if statistics from Alexa are accurate, less than half of the visitors for *Reporter's* website (43%) log on from an ISP in mainland Ethiopia, while the rest are situated abroad – chiefly in Europe and North America (www.alexa.com, August 2010). This serves to illustrate the immense importance of international audiences for African websites, especially for countries where Internet penetration is low. Regular Internet users in Ethiopia stand at 445,000 as of 30 June 2010 (www.internetworldstats.com), comprising 0.5% of the population. Only Sierra Leone is noted to have less Internet penetration in Africa.

The main research questions for the study are twofold: First, how does the content of the websites indicate a stance towards objectivity, autonomy and participation in journalism practice? Second, how do the editors view themselves in relation to journalistic professionalism? The two issues are related, but while the first research question aims to describe the approach of the websites in terms of content and style, the decisive focus of the research is on the second part, which interrogates journalism ideology on the basis of interviews with editors. Theoretically, the study makes use of models related to journalistic

professionalism, particularly Mark Deuze's (2005) typology which outlines a set of five values that define professional journalism as it has emerged in the research tradition: public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy and ethics. These five values, each of which is associated with a cluster of sub-values, are ideal-type norms and do not necessarily denote actual journalism practice; nevertheless, they pretend to constitute a comprehensive approach to defining a common professional identity for journalists, at least in Western societies. Deuze, however, goes on to argue that each of the values is contested in contemporary journalism owing to multimedia and multicultural realities. It is towards this latter argument the present study of Ethiopian diaspora journalism bears significance. Diaspora media channels, as elaborated above, are likely to challenge traditional journalism outlets both in form, function and *raison d'être*, thus making an examination of the effect on journalism ideology meaningful.

Of the five ideal-type values, two are deemed particularly important for the assessment of diaspora journalism, namely the dimensions of objectivity and autonomy. Objectivity, prescribing that journalists should strive to be impartial, neutral, balanced, fair and unbiased in reporting, is of interest because diaspora websites tend to rely heavily on a limited number of individuals, thus being less defined by institutional conformity and correctives. The second value dimension that is paid particular attention in the analysis below, autonomy, stipulates that journalists should be free and independent in their work. I shall propose, however, that a third value dimension bears significance too, enquiring how diaspora journalists position themselves in relation to the audience. The continuum on this dimension goes from exclusivity (journalism should be reserved for professionals) to inclusivity (anyone can engage in journalistic activities). The significance of this dimension owes to the assumed breakdown of the boundaries between content producers and consumers through new media technology. If these boundaries fade out, the situation is also likely to affect journalists' self-identity as media professionals. In classic journalism practice, however, the public's engagement neither involves content production on equal basis with professional journalists nor does it involve a sharing of editorship (cf. the debate on public journalism; Rosen, 1996; Black, 1997). Thus, each of these three dimensions, objectivity, autonomy and participation, are significant determinants in the assessment of journalism professionalism as expressed by online diaspora media channels.

The appearance of the websites

Assessing the websites' stance towards objectivity, autonomy and participation necessitates a scrutiny of the sites' content and self-presentation. The immediate impression when looking at the nine websites is that they share a marked focus on political issues. News stories usually circle around politics, or are presented as regular news bulletins in politicized wrapping. Impartial and unbiased news stories are not given much space. For example, Ethiopia's remarkable economic GDP growth rate of between 7 and 11 percent annually since 2005³ (CIA World Factbook; IMF) is hardly reported unless accompanied with critical comments from economists who question the validity of the numbers⁴. It follows that the classic distinction between fact and opinion is habitually overstepped. News reports are edited with the view to induce a political slant in presentation and terminology. A most innocent example is that of the word 'government' being replaced with 'regime' when referring to the Ethiopian national leadership. Some websites consistently resist the use of 'EPRDF' (acronym for the ruling coalition) and choose to talk about 'Woyane', which originally denoted a peasant uprising in the Tigray region in Ethiopia but today has turned into a derogatory name for the Tigray-dominated government. These sites also prefer to attribute prime minister Meles Zenawi as 'dictator' or 'tyrant'. Most striking is the editing on Ethiopian Review, which makes use of line-through to flag its editing of (allegedly uninformed) newswire articles. A syndicated bulletin from African Press Agency, for

example, begins as such: 'The 14th African Union Summit on Tuesday unanimously re-elected Ethiopian ~~Prime Minister~~ genocidal dictator Meles Zenawi to represent Africa in future global climate conferences.'⁵ Even more graphic are photographs and illustrations that occasionally accompany the articles, where the prime minister may appear with (manipulated) horns and vampire teeth, or with a long, forked snake tongue (also manipulated).

The lack of distinction between fact and opinion is also evident in the organizing of the articles as well as in the register of contributors. It is common for the websites to organize news articles and commentaries under the same heading with no tangible distinction. Those familiar with Ethiopian politics will recognize the position of contributors by means of their byline and thereby assume that they take on the role of commentators or political actors rather than reporters. Some of the writers are among the most experienced politicians and academicians in Ethiopian public life, now resuming their operations from the perspective of the diaspora. A number of them have a few 'household' websites that they collaborate with. For outsiders not familiar with Ethiopian politics, it may prove demanding to navigate through the subtle allusions associated with writers and issues. For readers of Ethiopian origin, however, the bias associated with the websites is part and parcel of their operation, and attempts at objectivity or impartiality are foreign to this mission.

In terms of the second dimension pertaining to journalism ideology, autonomy, it is observed that most of the sites are connected to an oppositional political grouping in Ethiopia or abroad. This impression emerges both from the choice of contributors, references in the text, and the leaning in the argumentation, as well as from hints provided in the hyperlink menus including visual attributes such as posters for protest marches in cities in Europe and North America. Arguably, the websites scrutinized here could be said to belong to three broader oppositional groups, politically speaking. The first favours a self-proclaimed 'peaceful struggle' against the government in power, supporting the opposition coalition Medrek where formerly jailed opposition party leader Birtukan Mideksa is the most featured personality (released from prison October 2010). Examples of web channels supporting this line are Ethiomedia, Addis Voice, Addis Neger and Abugida. More militant in its strategy is the second group, which constitutes a close ally to the opposition party Ginbot 7 and more than once has declared armed struggle as the only viable means to overthrow the Ethiopian government. The most thriving websites in this group are Ethiopian Review, Ethiopian Current Affairs Discussion Forum/ECADF and Ethiopian Media Forum. This constellation also tends to favour a strong relationship with Eritrea, as exemplified by a four-hour private interview that Eritrean president Isaias Afwerki gave to Ethiopian Review in May 2009 – an extremely rare opportunity by international press standards⁶. The third and last group of websites is less obvious in its political party orientation, but still carries a large amount of material critical of the government. The foremost example is Nazret.com, which mainly serves as a news portal with an assorted collection of Ethiopian news stories and commentaries, but still hosts the most active reader forum. Belonging to slightly different communities of websites are those which have an outspoken ethnic backing, notably those featuring Oromo interests (Habtamu, 2008; Gow, 2004), and a small family of pro-EPRDF websites (of which Aigaforum is the most recognized one). Apart from the last example, all are clearly independent from Ethiopian authorities, but all the more associated with the political opposition at different levels.

The third dimension to be addressed here, the extent of public participation, differs somewhat between the websites. All sites but three invite readers to post direct responses to articles. Importantly, however, all response fields are found to be pre-moderated, occasionally with mandatory personal registration. This way, the editors retain a certain degree of control with the debate, thereby maintaining the traditional distinction between journalists/editors and audiences. Reader participation is to some degree encouraged as the

public is invited to send reports and articles to the webmaster for publication, but the extent of such contributions end up being modest except for articles from the regular network of stringers that each website makes use of. In terms of interactivity, the various diaspora sites appear to be more oriented towards the other sites than to lay audiences. The participatory sphere that the diaspora media accommodate is first and foremost an extension of media initiatives that can be traced back to the established journalism community in Ethiopia. One may say that members of the diaspora continue to play out their political differences in the extended Ethiopian public sphere. The political debate in the diaspora media channels, however, is also marked by a high degree of contestation in positioning between the sites. Managers sometimes let their editing practices be guided by the changing relationships with other outlets. Upset with the argumentative strategy of Ethiopian Review, for instance, editor Abraha Belai of Ethiomedia decided to remove the link to the website from his own site in 2009. The link was only reinstalled after Abraha⁷ met Ethiopian Review's editor Elias Kifle in an online live debate in July 2010, though their differences were not quite ironed out (Abraha Belai, personal interview, 26 August 2010). The incident serves to illustrate how diaspora editors construct a self-defined public sphere in which they serve as both gatekeepers and participants in the debate. Public engagement and participation are aims in principle, but in reality the dominant position of already renowned writers and commentators is reinforced.

Overall, the appearance of the concerned diaspora media channels points to an uneven relationship with traditional journalism ideals. First, the websites contest the objectivity dimension through a proclaimed political bias in reporting and analysis. Secondly, with regard to autonomy, journalistic independence is upheld in an unmistakable detachment from the Ethiopian incumbent, but it is also contested through an alternative identification with political opposition groups. Thirdly, with regard to public participation, the websites support involvement in principle, but retain a professional distance between journalists and audience in practice. To what extent diaspora media activities ought to be defined within the frames of professional journalism ideology is therefore an ambiguous issue, if we are to judge from the appearance of the sites alone. Interviews with editors, however, may disentangle to what extent the media practices correspond with the editors' ideal-type view of journalism ideology.

Occupational and professional self-perception

Given the political character of the Ethiopian diaspora websites described above, the immediate impression would be that the editors are primarily motivated by political activism rather than journalistic professionalism. However, the outspoken political inclination may not necessarily point to a broken relationship with the wider journalism community and a profound conflict with professional ideals. Indeed, the editors express belonging to an occupational community characterized by shared ethical norms and professional demarcations. For example, asked about the mission of his site, one editor foregrounds the classic informative pluralist function of journalism practice: 'We strive to provide vibrant and diverse information from [the] Ethiopian perspective so that Ethiopians [may] make informed choices' (website editor, personal interview, 5 February 2009). The emphasis is thus on the website as a public service channel rather than as an outlet for advocating political ideas. Another editor highlights that his site subscribes to professional journalism ethics when claiming that the concerned site is 'the most accurate news and opinion journal, even by Western standards'⁸. The ethical standards of this and similar diaspora websites are greatly contested through their lack of fact-check and forwarding of hearsay (Skjerdal, 2009), but the message here is that the concerned editor emphasizes allegiance to a wider journalism community where a set of universal professional standards are perceived to be vital. The importance for diaspora reporters to connect to an international

journalism community is indicated by other studies as well, for example in Noha Mellor's (2010) research on unionization among Arab diaspora journalists.

That the persons in charge of the websites subscribe to professional journalism ideologies may not be surprising considering that most of them are found to have a past in journalism activities back home in Ethiopia. One case in point is *Addis Neger* mentioned earlier, which was transformed from a domestic newspaper publication to an online diaspora channel from 2009 to 2010 with largely the same personnel. Several of the other interviewed editors too were key players in the oppositional press in Ethiopia in the 1990s and 2000s. At least one editor has a past in the official propaganda press of the Dergue regime in the 1980s (which he sincerely regrets; personal interview, 27 August 2010). On the whole, all the most significant news-oriented online media of the Ethiopian diaspora – perhaps with the exception of Nazret.com – are found to be run by members of the same journalism fraternity that was previously active in the critical private press in Ethiopia. The various online channels can therefore be seen as a prolonging of former journalism activities in the homeland. This is expressed by several of the editors, who perceive themselves as filling the same gap in the media market as they did back home. One editor characteristically imparts that his web channel is 'serving as an alternative view for the Ethiopian people' (personal interview, 18 February 2009), while another says they try to 'give awareness to Ethiopians about the totalitarian regime in Ethiopia; to organize Ethiopians to protest against the Europeans who are financing the undemocratic government in Ethiopia' (personal interview, 4 February 2009). In other words, they assume a close link between providing an alternative media platform for Ethiopian audiences and fighting the incumbent, and the two cannot be kept apart, in their view.

The view as to whether it represents a professional conflict to simultaneously engage in news reporting and activism varies between the editors. However, they all justify the double-edged approach, either by blaming the (in their view) detrimental political situation in Ethiopia, or maintaining that the activism aspect is only associated with campaigning for free speech, human rights and democracy, not with party politics. One editor interestingly notes, 'it's a bit complicated to draw the line between activism and reporting in countries like Ethiopia' (personal interview, 2 September 2010), thereby implying that the local social and political environment has a bearing on journalism performance, while at the same time not abandoning what he sees as the ideal journalism type – namely a reporting style where news treatment and political activism are differentiated. The concerned editor in other words sees activist journalism as a less-than-ideal type that must prevail as long as the conditions for reporting freely in Ethiopia are limited. This view is contested by the view of another diaspora website editor, who opines that the hybrid journalism style of the diaspora actually represents an innovative and enduring form of journalism:

We belong to a new brand of journalism where formal reporting and activism go together. I try to stick to the old school of journalism – I do fair, balanced, objective and impartial reporting. But at the same time, I subscribe to human rights. We're pro-democracy, we're activists. We fight against repression, we fight against poverty by fighting corruption. It's not as if we remain neutral. We're doing a blend of journalism and activism. (Ethiopian diaspora website editor, personal interview, 27 August 2010)

It is however not evident that this type of journalism is all that new. Hybrid journalism genres in which news reporting and activism are combined are known from other contexts too, not the least from various political reporting traditions in Africa. In Zimbabwe, activist journalism tries to 'take up the weapon of words against Mugabe's guns' (Mbanga, 2008: 18). Danielle Batist (2010) argues that Zimbabwean exile journalists are compelled into an activist

approach because they are so personally affected by the issues on which they report. In South Africa, the radical journalism of Ruth First and others aided the struggle against apartheid (Pinnock, 2007), and the same reporting style would fit perfectly with Internet media, in the view of Francis Njubi (2001). In Nigeria, 'guerrilla journalism' was adopted by radical news magazines in the fight against the military regime in the 1990s (Maringuez, 1996) and is today revived on Nigerian diaspora sites, according to Kperogi (2008). What new online technology could add to activist journalism is a potential shift in focus from the select few to the many, from media practitioners to laypersons, from top-down instruction to bottom-up participation. The argument of this study, however, is that the online media of the Ethiopian diaspora first and foremost serve to manifest various traditional journalism values as the proclaimed ideal-type values for the profession. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the editor quoted above makes a profound distinction between journalism and activism in his concluding statement. When proclaiming that he is involved in a 'blend of journalism and activism', he insinuates that journalism should be regarded as a distinct practice which is recognized by its own value norms.

Concluding remarks

In discussing new developments in journalism ideology, Deuze (2005) suggests that multimedia reality – as well as multiculturalism – put into question each of the archetypical characteristics of professional journalism, that is, adherence to public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy and shared ethics. Deuze's theory has been approached in the present research through an exploration of diasporic media activities which potentially pose a challenge to traditional journalism paradigms by bringing new actors onto the journalistic arena, negotiating the value of journalistic independence, traversing media cultures, and so forth. An analysis of selected Ethiopian diaspora websites and interviews with editors affirm that the concerned media channels in several ways challenge objectivity norms, journalistic autonomy and traditional demarcations between content producers and audiences. However, this is on the level of actual media production, and, importantly, the study goes a step further by identifying a discrepancy between journalistic performance and the editors' ideal view of journalism. Editors believe journalism should be impartial, independent and ethically coherent, but limitations within the Ethiopian media sphere inflict a journalism practice characterized by activism and favouritism – both of which are especially accentuated in online diaspora media which are exempt from legal persecution by authorities. This resembles the media situation in various other societies which experience political and social constraints, such as the Libanese media's negligence of fairness and balance in news reporting (Dabbous, 2010). What the research into the Ethiopian diaspora online community suggests, however, is that journalists' preferred reporting style under these conditions must not be confused with their ideal-type professional norms. While implementation of journalistic professionalism are subject to social adjustments and changes in media formats, normative perceptions of journalism ideology appear more enduring.

Notes

1. According to Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (<http://fesmedia.org/access-to-information>).
2. It should be added that the websites were also selected on the basis of the editors' consent to be interviewed.
3. See CIA World Factbook (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/et.html>); IMF (<http://www.imf.org/external/country/ETH/>).
4. For example, 'The Ethiopian economy: Big numbers and empty bellies', Abbay Media, 26 August 2010 (<http://abbaymedia.com/News/?p=4903>) and 'Economists on Zenawi's double digit growth report', Ethiopian Media Forum, 24 August 2010 (<http://ethioforum.org/wp/archives/2350>).

5. 'African thieves re-elect Meles Zenawi to represent them', *Ethiopian Review*, 2 February 2010 (<http://www.ethiopianreview.com/content/12462>).
6. 'President Isaias Afwerki gives interview to Ethiopian Review', *Ethiopian Review*, 15 May 2009 (<http://www.ethiopianreview.com/content/9731>).
7. Ethiopians are referred to by their first name.
8. Uttered by Ethiopian Review's editor at the website's discussion forum 2 January 2009. See discussion under the threat 'Ethiopian Review is NOT blocked in Ethiopia' (<http://www.ethiopianreview.com/forum>).

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Note: Ethiopian authors are listed according to the local name tradition, i.e. by first name.

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