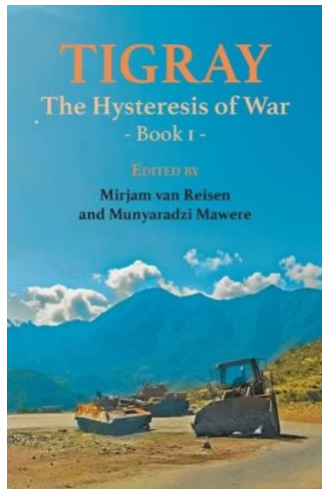


Weaponising the Media: Exploring the Role of Ethiopian National Media in the Tigray War

S.E. Geb & Daniel Tesfa

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Weaponising the Media:

**Exploring the Role of Ethiopian National Media in
the Tigray War**

S. E. Geb & Daniel Tesfa

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Today's listeners, the witnesses of tomorrow's jury

Abstract

This research examines the role of the Ethiopian media in the Tigray war, focusing on its use by the government to disseminate disinformation and further its agenda. It employs Hallin and Mancini's polarised pluralist model, Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, and Entman's framing theory to analyse media content, organisational connections, journalists' political activities, audience partisanship, and journalistic practices. These factors reveal political parallelism, while the propaganda model highlights information sources and anti-'others' sentiment. Iyengar's diagnostic and prognostic frames are also used. The study explores how the political narrative of the Tigray war was established and reinforced. Key indicators include the media's alignment with political entities, the influence of information sources, and the frames shaping public perception. The research found that state-owned and party-affiliated media promoted government narratives, blaming Tigrayans collectively. Media frames dehumanised Tigrayans, portraying them as threats to Ethiopian unity and justifying the war. Government-controlled narratives led to ethnic profiling, killings, and atrocities. Critical media faced closures, intimidation, and arrests, allowing state-affiliated media to dominate. The study concludes that the Ethiopian media played an inflammatory role in the Tigray war.

Key words: Tigray war, Ethiopia, media, hate-speech, disinformation, media control, framing

Introduction

Historically, the media has been used to instigate atrocities and war crimes, for example, in the first and second world wars (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1971), in Nazi Germany (Cole, 1998), and during the Vietnam war (Hallin, 1984; Taylor, 1992), Bosnian war (Kent, 2006), and Rohingya crisis (Brooten, 2015). A pertinent example of the media being weaponised to manipulate and mobilise the population is Rwanda. In Rwanda, it was found that an estimated 51,000 perpetrators, who committed 10% of the overall genocide in Rwanda, were incited to violence by Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) (Yanagizawa, 2014). More generally, in situations of war, the media is used to spread hate speech and propaganda, for the massive mobilisation of people against others, and consequent killings, as witnessed in Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Bosnia (Bratic, 2008).

The position that the media take on the causes and consequences of the war can either help resolve the conflict or aggravate the situation. The media can either play “an active part in the conflict and has responsibility for increased violence, or stays independent and out of the conflict, thereby contributing to the resolution of conflict and alleviation of violence” (Puddephatt, 2006, P. 4). This role is determined by various factors, including the degree of freedom given to the media power structures, particularly from those in power (Page, 1996).

The Tigray war, which started on 3 November 2020 and finished on 3 November 2022 with the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement coming into force, resulted in the displacement of more than two million people, widespread sexual violence and massacres, and a siege and blockage of Tigray that caused many civilians to die of starvation (Melicherová *et al.*, 2024; Kidanu & Van Reisen, 2024; Tesfa *et al.*, 2024a; Tesfa *et al.*, 2024b; Kahsay, 2024). During this period, and leading up to it, the situation was reported heavily in the media. The media in Ethiopia has played an important role in promoting specific narratives on the reasons and causes of the war in Tigray. This chapter asks: *What role did the Ethiopian media play in the war in Tigray, what were the narratives it disseminated, and how are the political realities in Ethiopia constructed upon the narratives?*

To answer this question, this study analysed media content and strategic factors that impacted on the way that the media contributed to the war. Before presenting the findings of the study, the following sections provide a brief background to set the context, followed by the theoretical framework and methodology used for this study.

Background

Media in Ethiopia

The development of media in Ethiopia is about a century old and has traditionally served the wishes and whims of those in power (Nigusie, 2014). The media has supported different political agendas at different times, with different underlying political ideologies. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which came to power in 1991 after deposing the Derg¹ during the Ethiopian Civil War, used the media to further its interests by repressing critical views (Gudeta, 2008). Contrary to this view Stremlau (2014) stated that the EPRDF adopted media policy that enabled the private media to flourish, which served as forum for elite negotiation on the constitution. Skjerdal further indicated:

The media situation in Ethiopia [during the EPRDF regime] is best seen as an interchange between coercion and liberalisation. The period begins with liberalisation (1991–92) and proliferation of new media outlets (1992–96); turning into a phase of government clampdowns (1996–2000); followed by consolidation and renewed diversity (2000–05); then abruptly changing direction due to post-election setbacks (2005–07); succeeded by an interlude of revitalization (2007–10); before once again being affected by a wave of coercion (2010–12). (Skjerdal, 2012, p. 17)

The broadcast media in Ethiopia has been dominated by a state and ruling party monopoly, except a few private radio stations based in Addis Ababa (Nutman, 2013). For most of its modern history, the news media in Ethiopia has been a tool for government control because most of the broadcast media were state owned, while the few

¹ The Military Committee, or Derg, was a Marxist-Leninist party that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991. Atrocities including red terror, murder, forced disappearance, abuse of power, crimes against humanity, war crimes etc. were attributed to the regime (Girmachew, 2006).

private press lacked legal and operational conduciveness to perform their roles (Skjerdal, 2012). However, in recent years, media ownership has been diversified between the state and different parties, with diversification of community and private ownership of the broadcast media since 2017. Skjerdal and Mulatu (2020) described this as a pluralistic media society, after the long history of state monopolised media system.

The state television includes Ethiopia Television (ETV), Amhara Media Corporation (AMC), Addis Media Network (AMN), Oromia Broadcast Network (OBN), Debub TV, Tigray Mass Media Agency (TMMA), Afar TV, Somali TV, Gambela TV, Benshgul Gmuuz TV and Harar TV. In addition, there are state-owned print and online media outlets including Ethiopia Press Agency (EPA) and Ethiopia News Agency (ENA). The ruling party affiliated television includes Fana Broadcasting Corporate (FBC), Walta TV and Dimtsi Weyane Television (DWTV). There are private television stations including EBS TV, ARTS TV, Ahadu TV, Nahoo TV, JTV Ethiopia and Kana TV. Diaspora based media – Ethiopia Satellite Television (ESAT) and Oromia Media Network (OMN) – both established branch in Addis Ababa, following the election of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Online and television media run by Ethiopian diaspora communities abroad, including Ethio 360 and Tigray Media House, also have a stake in the political communication of the country. The Reporter, Addis Standard, Ethio Forum, Reyot Media, Alpha Media, Ethiopia Insider and Ethiopia Business Review are among the privately run online and print media firms that report about Ethiopia.

Although freedom of expression is a fundamental human rights in international declarations, it is categorised as a democratic right in the Ethiopian Constitution (Zemchal, 2019). The media system in Ethiopia, including the private sector, is influenced by restrictive policy and regulatory approaches, under which the private media faces various challenges, including lack of access to government information, financial instability, heavy taxation on media materials as well as low institutional investment (Zemchal, 2019).

As soon as Prime Minister (PM) Abiy Ahmed came to power on 27 March 2018, the federal government took measures to remove

Tigrayans from the security, military and executive positions. Some of them were arrested, others fired. The then Chief of Staff of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) General Seare Mekonen and visiting retired Major-General Gezae Abera were killed on 22 June 2019 (Ethiopian Embassy, 2019). Both of them were Tigrayan (BBC, 2019). This event was followed by the merger of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) on 1 December 2019, which the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) claimed was unlawful (Assefa, 2018).

Initially, when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali came to power in 2018, there was hope of a new era of free media. The government freed journalists from prison; deregulated the sector, enabling the establishment of dozens of new media houses; and put into motion a media reform process that brought government and civil society together in a shared vision for change (Henok, 2022). However, Skjerdal and Mulatu (2020) state that the media system at the beginning of the Abiy era was observed as serving annihilation and othering frames, along ethnic-lines, by ethnically segmenting media institutions. Henok (2022) also indicated that the quick deregulation of a previously state-monopolised media system, without strong enabling institutions and laws, created a surge of media outlets and journalism associations, which fuelled polarisation and resulted in conflict along ethnic fault lines.

Political context

In 2018, after 27 years of power in Ethiopia, the coalition that made up the EPRDF² became unstable (Gardner, 2018). One of the main parties in the coalition, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), was seen as a threat by other members of the coalition – the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP), Amhara Democratic Party (ADP) and Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM). These political parties merged on 1 December 2019 to form the new

² The EPRDF was made up of a coalition of four parties: the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP), the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP), the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) (Assefa, 2018).

Prosperity Party (PP), which the TPLF declined to join (Abdurahman, 2019). This led to the removal of Tigrayans from federal and administrative jobs, as well as their parliamentary positions in Addis Ababa, and the vilification of the TPLF as responsible for various crimes and human rights violations (Tronvoll, 2020). Unfortunately, the people of Tigray have been conflated with Tigray’s ruling party, the TPLF, which dominated the EPRDF during its nearly three decades in power (Tronvoll, 2020). As a result, Tigrayans have been collectively blamed and persecuted for the wrongdoings of the EPRDF, although the people of Tigray suffered equally under the repressive policies of the coalition (Yohannes, 2018).

In 2019, PM Abiy Ahmed was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, among other reasons, for the Peace Agreement with Eritrea and his role in bringing about regional stability. However, the first of these achievements, the Peace Agreement with Eritrea, appears to have had an ulterior motive. This motive became apparent when forces from Eritrea, led by Isayas Afewerki, allied with the federal government of Ethiopia to invade Tigray. Afewerki’s statement: “አሽካሳል ወያነ ኣብቲ ዓለም ኣሸር ተባሂሉ” [“the theatre of Weyane³ is no more. Game over”] (ERi-TV, 2018a) revealed Eritrea’s plan to depose the TPLF and destroy the people of Tigray (ERi-TV, 2018b).

In 2018–2019 political actors⁴ in the Amhara region blocked the roads connecting Tigray from other parts of the country, as part of an economic siege (Samuel, 2019). The federal government seemed reluctant to resolve this situation or the growing disputes between Tigray and Amhara state (International Crisis Group, 2020). Instead, the federal government further marginalised Tigray by not disbursing the yearly budget allocated to Tigray (Al Jazeera, 2020a). In addition, the House of Representatives of the Tigray National Regional State

³ Weyane or Woyane is a derogatory term used to refer to the TPLF, and more broadly the people of Tigray.

⁴ The political actors in Amhara region that directly or indirectly contributed to the economic siege on Tigray include the Amhara Regional Government, Amhara Special Force, Amhara Militia, committees established in the name of regaining Welkayt and Raya from Tigray as well as Amhara Fano.

opposed the postponement of Ethiopia's sixth national election as unconstitutional and decided to have its own election. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed denounced Tigray's election as illegal. In defiance, the government of Tigray denounced the postponement of the national election as unconstitutional and conducted its own regional election in the first week of September 2020. This was followed by the federal government's mobilisation of troops against Tigray.

Both sides have their own narrative about who began the war. The federal government claims that the war was triggered because the Tigray forces attacked the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) on 4 November 2020, and that the federal government needed to intervene to restore control over the ENDF Northern Command Forces. According to other sources, the federal government had sent two planes with military commanders to Tigray on 3 November with the apparent aim to dismantle the Tigray administration (Van Reisen, 2021). According to Van Reisen, Smits and Kibrom (2021), the Tigray government had intelligence of the planned military action and stationed regional Special Forces when the planes with federal forces landed in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray. This resulted in armed fighting that started at the airport and which compelled the Tigray government to attack the Northern Command forces stationed in the region, to protect the regional government from being attacked (Van Reisen, 2021).

The events that precipitated the outbreak of war in November 2020 need further investigation, which is beyond the scope of this chapter. This study looks at the particular narratives that were promoted through the Ethiopian media. It was initially claimed by the federal government of Ethiopia that its invasion of Tigray was a brief 'law enforcement operation' to restore control over the regional state, which had broken away by organising elections which the Ethiopian government did not accept. But the Tigray War continued for two years after this and some say that the war has not yet ended, at the date of writing, as Western Tigray, parts of Southern Tigray, and North-Western, Eastern, and Central zones of Tigray are still under the control of a foreign invader, Eritrea, and Amhara Regional State militias. This investigation examines the role of the Ethiopian media

in the promotion of certain discourses on the reasons for, and causes of, the war in Tigray.

Theoretical framework

There are different theories that attempt to explain the role that the media plays in politics. The theoretical framework for this research is drawn from three theories – Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) political parallelism, under the polarised pluralist model, Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) propaganda model of manufacturing consent, as well as framing theories (Entman, 1993) – to understand the relationship between the media and political system in Ethiopia in reporting the Tigray war. The following subsections outline these theories.

Political parallelism

Hallin and Mancini (2004) define political parallelism as “the degree and nature of the links between the media and political parties or, more broadly, the extent to which the media system reflects the major political divisions in society” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 21). These scholars claim that even though a direct one-to-one connection between the media and the political system is not common today, political tendencies to control the media still exist (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). This is especially true when a news organisation (or most of its members) are aligned with a particular party.

Political parallelism has different components and indicators that can be used to identify the level of political presence in the media system of a certain country. The major indicators described by Hallin and Mancini (2004) are: media content, organisational connections, the tendency for media personnel to be active in political life, the partisanship of media audiences, and journalistic role orientations and practices. The indicator ‘media content’ refers to the extent to which political issues and events are covered in the news. The indicator ‘organisational connection’ describes the formal or informal connections the media has with political parties and other political actors, such as churches and trade unions (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The ‘tendency for media personnel to be active in political life’ refers to an individual journalist’s political persuasion or loyalty to a

particular political party they support or the service they provide under cover of the journalism practice, while ‘journalistic role orientations and practices’ explains how journalistic practices impact on the selection, collection, and dissemination of politically oriented news reports. Political parallelism can also be manifested in ‘the partisanship of media audiences’, as the media are often approached by different party supporters (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Propaganda model

McNair (2011) argues that the relationship between the media and the political process is a dialectical one, involving action and reaction. The media report on and analyse political activity and are available as a resource for political actors and their advisers. In response, political actors have a major interest in understanding how the media works, and how best to achieve their communication objectives through the medium (McNair, 2011). Political actors and the state try to influence the media and stop it from performing its watchdog role. They try to control and manage the content of the news. States use different mechanisms for this, such as censorship, secrecy, regulation, and propaganda (Street, 2001).

According to McNair (2011), political content is considered and realised through the relationship between political organisations, the media, and the audience. Although, in theory, the media is meant to be independent, objective, impartial and unbiased, the literature reveals that, in practice, various factors influence this. As a result, the process of media production can be manipulated by those who have access to the media on favourable conditions. Herman and Chomsky (1988) highlight that the structure and performance of the media is affected by those who have the most resources or political power (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

The propaganda model deals with the political economy of the mass media. The model is described as “the media system in which money and power are able to filter out the news to print, marginalise dissent, and allow the government and private interests to get their messages across to the public” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 2). In their propaganda model, Herman and Chomsky (1988) identified five

filters of mass media news which consistently served the interests of the elite, determining which news or information to disseminate to the public, which to make salient and which to omit (silence). These filters are (1) the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth and profit orientation of the dominant mass media, (2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media, (3) 'flak' and the enforcers, (4) sources of information, and (5) anti-ideological others as a controlling mechanism (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). This research uses the fourth and fifth filters – sources of information and anti-others, adopted by Alford (2017) from anti-communism (Herman & Chomsky, 1988) to anti-ideological others or anti-others filters (Alford, 2017), news filters – for this analysis.

Framing theory

Framing is defined as the “selection of information and rhetorical devices, the sender of a communication may explain the relevant policy problem and designate solutions” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Framing is an essential body of political communication research that examine how media affects public opinion (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Frames are “the selection, organisation and emphasis of certain aspects of reality, to the exclusion of others” (de Vreese *et al.*, 2001, p. 108).

Frames “shape individual understanding and opinion concerning an issue by stressing specific elements or features of the broader controversy, reducing a usually complex issue down to one or two central aspects” (Nelson *et al.*, 1997, p. 568). Iyengar (1991) classified framing of political news reporting into episodic and thematic frames that influence citizen’s attributions of responsibility, emotional reaction and policy views. Episodic framing targets creating news incidents that trigger emotional reactions of the public in favour of the framed policy while thematic frame focuses on strategic positioning of broader policy issues in a general context (Aarøe, 2011). According to Iyengar (1991) thematic frames focus on political issues and events in a broader context and present collective, abstract, and general evidence while episodic frames describe concrete events and particular cases that illuminate the issue. Accordingly, this

research examined the episodic and thematic framing of the selected media organisations about the Tigray war.

Integration of a conceptual framework

The research is guided by Hallin and Mancini's polarised pluralist model of media, political parallelism, as well as Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model and Entman's framing theory. Accordingly, factors like media content, organisational connections, the tendency of journalists to be active in political activities, the partisanship of the media audience, journalistic role orientations and practices (indicators of political parallelism), as well as source of information and anti-others filters of propaganda model were used as criteria for analysis. This section presents the results of this research using the four indicators from the political parallelism model identified by Hallin and Mancini (2004), the two filters from the propaganda model (Herman and Chomsky, 1988) as well as diagnostic and prognostic frames identified by Iyengar (1991). The researchers preferred to integrate the criteria from the mentioned theories so as to explore how the political narrative of the Tigray war was established and reinforced through examining the media content, the media system as well as the government organisational connections employed to establish and maintain the narrative.

Methodology

Approach

A qualitative methodology was used in this study to explore how the media in Ethiopia, other than in Tigray – including Ethiopia Broadcasting Corporation (ETV), Fana Broadcasting Corporate (FBC), Walta Television, Ethiopia Satellite Television (ESAT), Amhara Media Corporation (AMC), Addis Media Network (AMN) and Oromo Broadcasting Network (OBN), Ethiopia Press Agency (EPA) and Ethiopia News Agency (ENA) – reported the Tigray war. The research team utilised media content, organisational connections, the tendency of journalists to be active in political activities, the partisanship of the media audience, journalistic role orientations and practices criteria of political parallelism, source of information and anti-others filters of propaganda model as well as episodic and

thematic frames of framing theory. Table 5.1 explains the list of research criteria and the type of data utilised in this research.

The data collected for this research included: media data (news, documentaries and speeches), focus group discussion (FGD) and in-depth interviews (IDIs).

Table 5.1. Research criteria and types of data used

| No. | Criteria | Type of data used |
|-----|---|---|
| 1 | Media content | Media data (news, documentaries and speeches) |
| 2 | Organisational connection | FGD, IDI and (to lesser extent) media data |
| 3 | Tendency for media personnel to be active in political life | IDI, FGD and media data |
| 4 | Journalistic role orientations and practices | IDI, FGD and media data |
| 5 | Partisanship of media audiences | Media data, IDI and FGD |
| 6 | Source of information | IDI, FGD and media data |
| 7 | Anti-others | IDI, FGD and media data |
| 8 | Diagnostic frame | Media data |
| 9 | Prognostic frame | Media data |

Source of criteria: Adapted by the authors from Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Herman & Chomsky, 1988 and Entman, 1993

The operational definition of media the researchers used in the above table explicitly defines the mainstream broadcast, online and print publications. Media content was used in all research criteria. The research team used qualitative content analysis to explore the distinct patterns in the diagnostic and prognostic frames of reporting. The research encompassed print media, online articles, documentaries, television broadcasts, and YouTube. The research mainly used news, speeches and documentaries disseminated/published by the mainstream print and broadcast media in Ethiopia.

The research process included a verification of the provenance of media items. In some cases, the research team found that the speeches which were disseminated by the selected mainstream media were removed from their online documentation-YouTube page. Hence, the team used alternative documentation links of the mainstreamed content from other YouTube and social media pages. To verify the originality of the videos that were used from alternative documentations, the research team disseminated a survey through Google forms to 30 experts in digital media, communication, videography, information science and computer science. Almost all (28) of them responded to the survey. Accordingly, all of them verified (100%) that five of the videos we surveyed were originally disseminated by at-least one of the national broadcasters. For the remaining four videos we used from alternative documentation, 25 (89.3%), 27 (96.4%), 24 (88.9%) and 26 (96.3%) responded that they were originally disseminated by at-least one of the national media organisations.

In addition, interviews and a focus group discussion were conducted with media professionals, members of editorial teams at state media houses and strategic actors, who provided data on how the media ownership and institutional structural, as well as factors related to media practices, influenced media content during the reporting of war narratives. Table 5.2 summarises the coded list of participants in in-depth interview and focus group discussion.

Table 5.2. Participants of IDIs and FGD

| No. | Description of source | of Work | Tool | Assigned code |
|-----|-----------------------|---|------|---------------|
| 1 | Editor | Work for national mainstream media based in Mekelle | IDI | EDIDI01 |
| 2 | Reporter | Work for national mainstream media based in Mekelle | IDI | REIDI02 |

| No. | Description of Work source | Work | Tool | Assigned code |
|-----|-----------------------------------|---|------|---------------|
| 3 | Government Communication official | Worked for government communication bureau based in Mekelle | IDI | COIDI03 |
| 4 | Reporter | Work for national mainstream media based in Mekelle | IDI | REIDI04 |
| 5 | Member of editorial team | Worked for national mainstream media based in Addis Ababa | IDI | ETIDI05 |
| 6 | Member of editorial team | Work for national mainstream media based in Addis Ababa | FGD | ETFGD01 |
| 7 | Member of editorial team | Worked for national mainstream media based in Addis Ababa | FGD | ET1FGD01 |
| 8 | Editor | Work for national mainstream media based in Mekelle | FGD | EDFGD01 |
| 9 | Reporter | Work for national mainstream media based in Mekelle | FGD | REFGD01 |
| 10 | Coordinator | Work for national mainstream media based in Mekelle | FGD | COFGD01 |

The research process was started after obtaining ethical clearance obtained from College of Social Sciences and Languages (reference number CSSL/RCS/0005) in Mekelle University. All the participants in the in-depth interviews and focus group discussion consented to

provide information as well as to use their opinions in the research. The in-depth interviews were conducted on 18 May to 15 June 2022, while the focus group discussion was conducted on 22 June 2022.

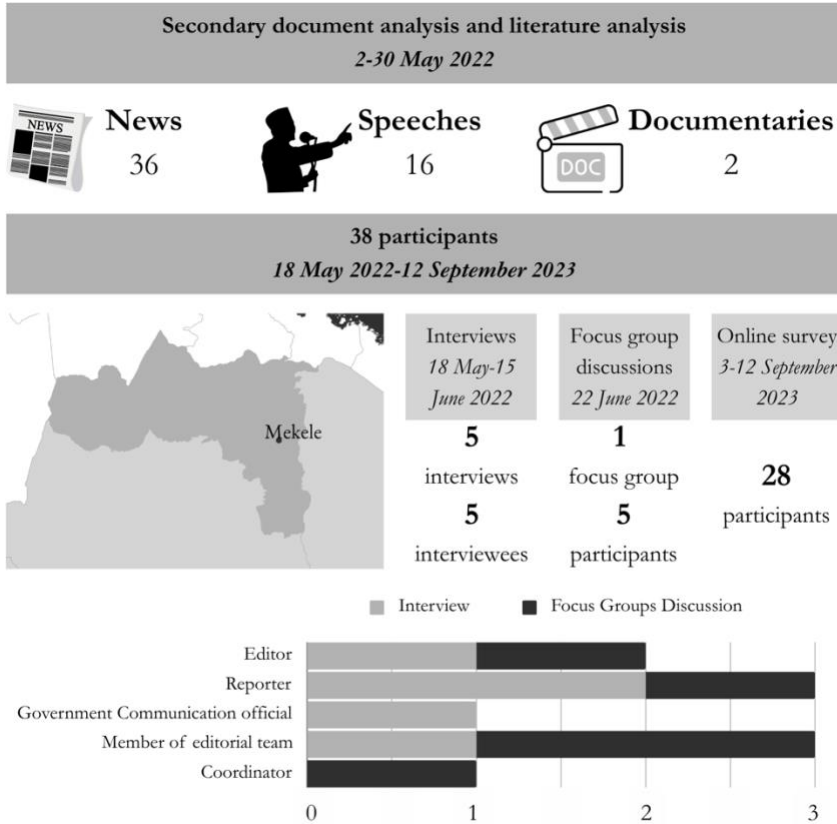


Figure 5.1. Overview of data collected and used in this study

Sampling procedure

Multiple-stage purposive sampling was used for the qualitative content analysis. In determining the media content, documentaries and news reporting were selected for analysis. Firstly, documentaries on Tigray and/or Tigrayans instigated by the media and broadcast by ETV, FBC, Walta Television, ESAT, AMC, AMN and OBN after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in April 2018 were purposively selected. These documentaries included *Yefitib Sekoka* (contextually translated as “The Agony of Injustice”) (OBN, 2018) and *Shiwoch Yetesewulet Yeginbot Haya Dil Yekelebesew Yegifegnoch Bedel*

(contextually translated as ‘The Heartless Who Manipulated the May 20 Conquest’) (Walta TV, 2020) were selected for analysis. *Yefitih Sekoka* was broadcast by more than 10 local and federal media institutions, including ETV, AMC, ESAT, FBC, Walta TV, OBN AMN and Debub TV on 11 December 2018 at the same time, while *Shiwoch Yetesewulet Yeginbot Haya Dil Yekelebesew Yegifegnoch Bedel* was broadcast by ETV, Walta TV, FBC and many other media outlets in the last week of May 2020. Table 5.3 presents the list of the media data used and the sampling technique applied.

Table 5.3. Media data used and sampling technique used

| No. | Type of content | Sampling technique |
|-----|--|--|
| 1 | Documentary (Yefitih Sekoka disseminated in December 2018 and Shiwoch Yetesewulet Yeginbot Haya Dil Yekelebesew Yegifegnoch Bedel broadcast in May 2020) | Purposively selected to explore how Tigrayans were portrayed before the declared war. Both documentaries were disseminated by many media including ETV, Walta TV, ESAT, OBN, AMN, AMC and FBC at the same broadcast time. |
| 2 | News (October 2020 to December 2020) | News from ETV (8 pm), ENA and EPA were purposively selected to understand how the Tigray war was portrayed-a month before the start of the Tigray war, during the month of declared war and a month after the declared war. |
| 3 | Speeches about Tigray, Tigrayans and Tigray war | Speech by public officials and influential persons before and during the declared war were purposely selected for analysis. Convenience sampling was utilised to purposively select speeches which explicitly discuss Tigray, Tigrayans and Tigray |

| No. | Type of content | Sampling technique |
|-----|-----------------|---|
| | | war which were disseminated by any of the Ethiopian media. ⁵ |

Secondly, news content disseminated by three state media stations, ETV, EPA and ENA, were purposely selected to examine how state media framed the war. Accordingly, the 8 pm prime news broadcast by ETV was selected to understand how the state media framed Tigray, Tigrayans and the causes of the Tigray war. These prime news broadcasts were canvassed from October 2020 to December 2020 (a month before the start of the Tigray war, which began in November 2020, to a month after). The timeframe was selected to understand how the media reported the antecedence (October 2020) and immediate (in November 2020) causes of the Tigray war, as well as the effects of the war (examined after the war in December 2020). News stories published by EPA and ENA during the periods were also analysed in order to explore how various state-owned media genres (broadcast, print and online) portrayed the war.

Thirdly, speeches about Tigray, Tigrayans and Tigray war by public officials and influential persons were also utilised as part of the content analysis. The research used convenience sampling to purposively select speeches which exclusively discussed Tigray, Tigrayans and the Tigray war. The sampling time frame started from August 2016, the time when ethnic slurs against Tigray began to be spread through official media, to October 2022, the signing of the Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement between TPLF and the Ethiopian government. Speeches by public officials, military leaders, artists and local militia leaders were selected for their contribution to public opinion making of the Ethiopian audience.

⁵ In a few cases the research team used the links of the speeches from social media and online media because some of the mainstream media organisations deleted the speeches from their pages. Thus, the team didn't sample social media content for itself, but used it to locate the speeches that were deleted from the mainstream media. The originality of the videos used from alternative documentations were verified using experts' survey.

The main purpose of analysing the documentaries and speeches was to generate an in-depth understanding of how the media portrayed Tigray and Tigrayans during the media propaganda war (from December 2018 to October 2020). The focus of the prime news and speeches analysis was to explore how the media framed the causes and effects of the Tigray war. In addition, the viewpoints of journalists, members of editorial teams, and strategic leadership from some of the media houses who were involved in shaping the way the Tigray war was framed participated in interviews and a focus group discussion. This is because the research aimed to explore the practice of the media houses and the interaction among media professionals, managers, the political groups and other opinion makers parallel with the media content.

Data collection tools

The research employed three techniques for data collection. Firstly, the research team gathered the media content used during the timeframes specified above. The media content (news, speeches and documentaries) was retrieved from the YouTube pages of the different media stations from 15–30 May 2022: ETV,⁶ ESAT,⁷ FBC,⁸ OBN⁹ and Walta TV¹⁰. The news stories from EPA¹¹ and ENA¹² were accessed on 2–14 May 2022.

Secondly, journalists (reporters and editors) and editorial team members who work or worked in three of the national media outlets were purposively selected for interview and focus group discussion. Five journalists who worked for three national media outlets in Ethiopia as well as a member of the communication leadership, who was responsible for shaping how the Tigray war should be framed,

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/c/EBCworld>

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/@ESATvEthiopia>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/@fanabroadcastingcorporate>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/@OBNoromiyaa>

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/@WaltaTV>

¹¹ <https://press.et/herald/>

¹² <https://www.ena.et>

were interviewed in the period from 18 May to 15 June 2022. A focus group discussion was also conducted to explore the way the Tigray war was framed. Two former editorial staff from two national media outlets, one editor, one coordinator and one reporter of the national media outlets participated in the focus group discussion which was conducted on 22 June 2022.

Data analysis

The analysis of the data gathered explored the commonly applied frames, media sources and their link(s) (deviation from) with political interests, as well as how the media attributed responsibility in reporting the Tigray war.

The media content was first collected, and then reviewed by the researchers and selected according to criteria that were driven from the theoretical framework. Material that was originally published in Tigrinya or Amharic language was translated by authors into English. After three brainstorming sessions between the researchers, initial codes were developed from the pool of the data. Then the coded categories were registered in Excel sheets. Themes were then developed based on the codes. Then the research team cross checked that the themes developed captured the essence of the whole data. Finally, the analysis was conducted based on the themes developed.

Results

In this section, the findings are presented on media content, organisational aspects related to the media, the political engagement of members of the media, the media audience, the orientation on journalistic roles and practices and the role of source and anti-others elements of discourse. The research used news, speeches and documentaries for the analysis of media content; IDIs, FGD and news for organisational connection, and data from IDIs, FGD and news for media personnel, journalistic roles and partisanship of media audience, source of information and anti-others.

Media content

The findings with regards to the media content are presented according to the classification of several narratives that were found to

dominate the interpretation of events. These narratives are discussed below.

The ‘Fish’ and the ‘Sea’: Media as a whetstone for ethnic incitement

The diaspora-based medium, ESAT, used an ethnically motivated framing to instigate Ethiopians to stand together against the TPLF/EPRDF rule. ESAT called for action against Tigrayans in a broadcast by journalist Mesay Mekonen on 6 August 2016, referring to Tigray people as “(deformed) fish” that should be removed:

This delinquency plan is 5 million people to 95 million people. So, the one and the only way of exterminating the deformed fish from the sea is through dispelling the sea. Thus, without doubt, we call for all to begin taking our measures wherever we are. (Tghat, 2021)¹³

In this call, the Tigrayan mass is portrayed as the sea while the TPLF is represented by deformed fish. Accordingly, the call explicitly called Ethiopians to exterminate the people of Tigray in order to exterminate the TPLF once and forever.

The youth protests in Oromia and some parts of Amhara challenged the political, economic and social structures of the country which forced the EPRDF to appoint a new leader from Oromo, Abiy Ahmed, as a political solution to the crisis. Abiy Ahmed became chairman of the EPRDF on 27 March 2018 and was elected Prime Minister of Ethiopia in April of the same year. While the Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement within the context of the conclusion of the Peace Agreement, was a headline in 2018, President of Eritrea, Isayas Afwerki, uttered “*Weyane*¹⁴... Game over” (ERi-TV, 2018a), and revealed in his discussion with the youth in Sawa that his regime aimed at the political cleansing of Tigray (ERi-TV, 2018b). This was complemented by Prime Minister Abiy’s portrayal of Tigrayans as “daylight hyenas” who perpetrated the bombing of a public gathering

¹³ The original Amharic version of ESAT’s call to Ethiopians is as follows: “ይህ የጥፋት እቅድ የታቀደው ከ5 ሚሊዮን ህዝብ ለ95 ሚሊዮን ህዝብ ነው። ስለዚህ የተበላሸን አሳ ከባህር ማስወገጃ መንገዱ አንዱ ነው የባህሩ ወሃ ማስወገድ። ስለዚህ ሳናመታ ሁላችንም በየለንበት እርምጃችንን እንድንጀምር ጥሪ እናስተላልፋለን።”

¹⁴ Weyane or Woyane is a derogatory term used to refer to the TPLF, and more broadly the people of Tigray.

in his support in Meskel Square on 23 June 2018 (EBC, 2018), saying that they were anti-reformists and had escaped to Mekelle, the capital of Tigray (Yethiopia News, 2018).

‘Tigrinya speakers’: Yefitih Sekoka

Shortly after these events, in December 2018, the State and State-affiliated media in Ethiopia released the documentary *Yefitih Sekoka* (contextually translated as ‘The Agony of Injustice’). This documentary positioned Tigrayans as the sole perpetrators of human rights violations in Ethiopia (Fana Television, 2018a). The documentary, which ran for around an hour and half, was broadcast by seven television agencies: ETV, FBC, Walta TV, AMN, AMC, OBN and Debub TV. It used the term ‘Tigrinya speakers’ and described Tigrayans as torturers, murderers, corrupt, excruciates, ghosts, traitors, homosexual and devils who stood against Ethiopian national interests.¹⁵ In the documentary, the narrator explained that the source of the information was the Investigation Team assigned by the Office of Attorney General to investigate human rights violations (OBN Oromiyaa, 2018, 0:01:56–0:02:41).

The documentary set the agenda for the audience in the first five minutes, alleging that ‘Tigrinya speakers’ (Fana Television, 2018a, 0:05:25) were responsible for human rights violations, later mentioning torching, electric shock, beating, and murder (Fana Television, 2018a, 0:50:01), and attributing these acts to the people of Tigray (Fana Television, 2018a, 1:03:26). The narrator introduced one of the alleged victims, Andualem Ayalew, an Ethiopian who joined the Ginbot-7¹⁶ trained by Eritrea to rebel against Ethiopia, who was captured while on a mission in Sudan. Andualem says “Four Tigrinya

¹⁵ The actual words used in the documentary to describe Tigrinya speakers were ደብዳቤዎች (torturers), ነፍስ ገዳዮች (murderers), ሙሰኞች (corrupt), አሰቃይ (excruciates), መናፍስት (ghosts), ከሀዲዎች (traitors) ግብረሰዶማውያን (homosexuals) and ሰይጣኖች (devils) (Fana Television, 2018a).

¹⁶ Ginbot-7 was a political opposition movement established by Berhanu Nega in the United States on 15 May 2008 (Global Security, 2016). It was then turned into an armed group, which was supported by Eritrea until Abiy Ahmed became Prime Minister. Currently, some of the members of the movement are serving as members of the Prime Minister’s executives, including Berhanu Nega.

speaking people and two Sudanese security members subdued me” (Fana Television, 2018a, 0:05:23–0:05:34).

Andualem’s speech indicated that Eritrea was working to bring about regime change in Ethiopia.¹⁷ Eritrean President Isayas Afwerki’s political cleansing plan in Tigray, which he disclosed in the 8th Eritrean Youth Festival Seminar in Sawa, complemented why Eritrea had been supporting the Ginbot-7 rebel based in Eritrea.

The news disseminated by ERi-TV on 13 July 2018 about the 8th Eritrea Youth Festival Seminar in Sawa showing President Isayas Afwerki stated:

In the seminar President Isayas said Weyane’s political scuff and sarcasm is over. But he underlined that we need to have serious and intelligent determination to cleanse its ruminants and conduct political cleansing. (ERi-TV, 2018b, 0:08:43-0:08:56)¹⁸

These indicated that both Ethiopia and Eritrea conducted collaborative propaganda campaign against Tigray. Ethiopia used Andualem Ayalew, a member of Ginbot-7 who was trained in Eritrea to bring about regime change in Ethiopia, while Eritrea disclosed its political cleansing plan on Tigray through President Isayas Afwerki. Both stories were published in 2018 before the two countries signed the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship.

An anonymous investigator who was interviewed in Yefith Sekoka claimed that the attempted assassination of the Prime Minister on 23 June 2018 was carried about by Tigrinya speakers, as the weapons were captured from Tigrayans in the office of Ethiopia’s National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) (Fana Television, 2018a, 0:24:27–0:25:58). In the documentary Tigrayans were portrayed as

¹⁷ Andualem was a member of the Ginbot-7 party that was based in Eritrea aimed at bringing regime change in Ethiopia that was receiving military, propaganda and financial from Eritrea (Sudan Tribune, 2013).

¹⁸ “ወያነ ዝፈጠሮ ፖለቲካዊ ፀወታን ኣሸካሶላልን ኣኸተሙ እዩ ዝበለ ፕረዚደንት ኢሳያስ ንሱ ዝፈጠሮ ሓድጊ ንምፅራይን ፖለቲካዊ ሕፅቦ ንምክያድን ግን ዕቲብን ንቑሕን ፃዕሪ ከምዘድሊ ኣስሚሩሉ” (ERi-TV, 2018, 0:08:43-0:08:56)።

‘ogres’ (Fana Television, 2018a), ‘ghosts’, and ‘devils’, who committed atrocious crimes against civilians as a way of life (OBN, 2018).

‘Tigrinya speakers’ (referring to the people of Tigray) were compared by the narrator with historic traitors who worked for foreign invaders during Ethiopia’s struggle for sovereignty (Fana Television, 2018a, 0:0:50–0:01:40). Their identity as Ethiopians was questioned: “frankly speaking, are these people Ethiopians?” (Fana Television, 2018a, 0:30:03–0:30:24). They were also compared with Adolf Hitler in World War II, as indicated in the quote below (Fana Television, 2018a, 0:54:35–0:54:54). One of the speakers who explained himself as a victim, Yohanes Tefera, said:

My eyes don't function well. Especially my right eye is no more functioning. This is because they put me out of sunlight for four months and twenty days. Though their attempt to harm my reproductive organ was failed my right testicle is damaged. This kind of preventing man from reproduction, I don't know, may be Hitler had perpetrated it. (Fana Television, 2018a, 0:54:20–0:54:54)

The documentary frequently used the term Tigrinya speakers to identify the perpetrators. This is an implicit term which is commonly used to describe the whole ethnic groups of Tigrayans. Thus, the documentary portrayed Tigrinya speakers as ogres, ghosts, devils and traitors who perpetrated crimes against Ethiopians not Ethiopians themselves.

‘Eat hyena and get blessed’: Dehumanisation by Mainstream Media

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s term ‘daylight hyena’ was one of the portrayals of Tigrayans that reverberated among the general population. Among Ethiopia’s influential personalities, artist Debebe Eshetu supported the use of this term as appropriate and, in June 2018, he said that measures must be taken.

He [Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed] said hyenas, he is right. What I want to advise Dr Abiy is that there is a tale; eat the hyena and get blessed before you are eaten by them. Let's eat them and get blessed. We will become sacred. (Sodere TV, 2018, 0:00:46–0:01:01)

The term hyena in the Ethiopian idiomatic expression is used to portray someone who is barbed, egotistical and stingy or someone who stands against society to manipulate the values of human

behaviour and morale for their own personal gain at the cost of society. Hyenas are usually active at night calendar, and people protect themselves through fencing their house, but anything left out at night is destined to be eaten by the hyenas. The term daylight hyena then portrays someone who shamelessly demonstrates non-human and callous behaviour in daytime, without being concerned that they may be seen by others. Thus, someone who is called a daylight hyena is considered callous and greedy, against which all necessary measures are taken to eliminate.

In addition, the Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, Daniel Kibret, described Tigrayans as monsters, devils and sneaks (Tebta Mar, 2019; Zamader collection, 2021).¹⁹ In addition, live footage of Tigrayan General Kifle Dagnew's arrest for alleged embezzlement portrayed Tigrayans as a threat to national security (Fana Television, 2018b).

On top of this, the judiciary reinforced the politically motivated allegations by labelling Tigrayans as perpetrators of various atrocious crimes committed throughout the country. Adanech Abebe, while she was serving as Attorney General, in a media brief about assassination of the musician and activist from Oromo, Hachalu Hundessa, attributed 'Tigrinya speakers' as responsible for planning the assassination (Fana Television, 2020b). The public officials attributed the assassination of Hachalu Hundessa to "Weyane who escaped to Mekele and Oromia Liberation Army (OLA) (Fana Television, 2020c). Conversely, Al-Jazeera's the Listening Post producer (Phillips, 2020) stated that Hachalu's interview with Oromia Media Network was critical of the government as well as the Emperor Menelik's oppression against the Oromo people. She added "Just one day after Hachalu's interview went out calls for his death spread on social media. A week later he was gunned down in Addis Ababa" (Al Jazeera English, 2020). But the government used the justice system

¹⁹ The original words in Amharic by the Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, Daniel Kibret, are ቆራቆ (monsters), አግንጎት (devils) and እባብ (sneak) (Tebta Mar, 2019; Zamader collection, 2021).

and national media to allege that Tigrinya speakers were the orchestrators behind the assassination of Hachalu Hundessa.

‘30 million to 6 million’: Call for annihilation

The hatred against Tigrayans was not restricted to magazines, books, and diaspora media channels like ESAT. When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power, the state media, including EPA, ENA and ETV, also joined in by denigrating the EPRDF’s victory that overthrew the dictatorial Derg regime (Ethiopian Press Agency, 2020). However, at the same time, some of the main actors in the military wing of the Derg regime acted as military advisors to the federal government on how to wage war against Tigray. Among them, Kassaye Chemed, a retired military member of the Derg regime, said to a government-affiliated Walta TV on 9 July 2020: “The government should plan well, and they should be attacked” (Michael Laine, 2021).

He added:

The Ethiopia Defense Force and security personnel should warn those who challenge us with a stick and weapon. If they resist, they must shoot them. This is a timely pronouncement. Nothing should be compromised about Ethiopia. The one who escaped to the stony Mekelle, when their affiliates are being targeted, the government must, I don’t go deep into the details for now, but it is possible, they must be shot with a well-established plan. (Michael Laine, 2021)²⁰

In addition, a member of the leadership of Amhara Fano (a group of paramilitary youth, some retired members of the military during the Derg regime and local militia in Amhara region), Mesafint Tesfu, said that Tigrayans do not deserve the factories they own, calling the youth to war in Tigray. He said:

If we are allowed, we urge that as they are defiant, Tigray is too small for us. We will clutch it, [applause continues for 7 seconds]. We will bring the factories you own

²⁰ Speech by Kassaya Chemed, on Walt TV, 9 July 2020: “ዱላ ይዞ ትጥቅ ይዞ በመንደሩ እንትን የሚለን የኢትዮጵያ መከላከያ ሰራዊትና የፀጥታ አስከባሪዎች አስቀምጥ እምቢ ካለ በጥይት ማለት ነው። በቃ ጊዜው ጊዜያዊ አዋጅ ነው። ከኢትዮጵያ ወዲህ ምንም ነገር የለም። ባለፈው ወገኑ ሁሉ ተመትቶ ሸሽቶ እዛ ድንጋይ ስር መቀሌ ሂዶ የገባው እሱ ላይ መንግስት እኔ አሁን ዝርዝሩን አልናገርም ይቻላል ደምበኛ እቅድ ተደርጎ መመታት አለባቸው።”

there. Unless anyone is able to bring it for us, we will by ourselves [acclaim continues for 8 seconds]. (Ab sha Tube, 2020)

In news broadcasts on 24 May 2020 state media institutions, ETV, EPA, and ENA, went one step further by calling the federal government of Ethiopia to intervene in Tigray (EBC, 2020a).

At the same time, the armed groups in Amhara region were preparing for war, using the media to mobilise the youth, as evidenced in the following statement by a member of Amhara Fano:

Instead of dying for nothing, it is worthy to die killing one Tigre. Maybe the population of Tigray is 6 million while the population of Amhara is around 30 million. Perhaps if we garrison 6 million people to fight only Tigray, the remaining people will be liberated. (Gebrekirstos, 2020)

With the national election of Ethiopia indefinitely postponed mentioning the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed warned that Tigray's regional election would result in the "extermination of youth, snivelling of mothers and destruction of homes" (Haq Ena Saq ሃቅ ክና ሳቅ, 2020).

Law enforcement to survival campaign: The evolving frames of the Tigray War

While declaring military action against Tigray on 4 November 2020, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed framed that Tigrayans attacked the ENDF from behind while it was on a mission to protect them from the enemy (EBC, 2020h). He stated:

Honoured people of Ethiopia, today traitor Ethiopians poked Ethiopia. Ethiopia, its generous hands and its motherly breasts that fed them are bitten. The Ethiopian National Defence Force that protected its territory and people, with martyrdom in thousands, wounded, bled and suffered in desert fords for the past twenty years, was attacked by traitors and their forces in Mekelle and other areas as of the night. This attack is infamous because the army didn't face such a situation while being in peacekeeping mission in its history let alone in its country where now is attacked from behind where many sacrificed martyrdom and wounded as well as resources destroyed. (EBC, 2020h, 0:00:32-0:01:49)

In his speech, the Prime Minister used terms traitors, greedy Junta, ingrate and criminals to portray the political administration in Tigray

(EBC, 2020h). Subsequently, the parliament declared state of emergency in Tigray on 5 November 2020 (EBC, 2020i). The Prime Minister described the Ethiopian government’s action on Tigray as law enforcement operation on 6 November 2020 (EBC, 2020j). On the next day, the House of Federation fully passed a resolution that the federal government must fully intervene in Tigray (EBC, 2020k). The National Intelligence and Security Service publicised that it had captured ‘terrorists’ in Addis Ababa City, as well as Gambela and Benshangul Gmuz regions, who were preparing to perpetrate attacks on the public at the behest of the TPLF (EBC, 2020k).

The federal government explained that its action in Tigray aimed at enforcing order as part of its constitutional mandate. The Prime Minister said:

The people of Tigray, the militia and special force must be aware that this action will stop when these criminals who pulled nails, killed civilians and looted resources are all captured. This confrontation, which is not with anyone else but with the greedy Junta, these forces, will be stopped when they are handed over to order and ensure that the law works for all of us. This action is being implemented based on the constitution. (EBC, 2020l, 0:06:58-0:07:34)

The alleged victims of human rights violations who portrayed Tigrinya speakers as perpetrators of the crimes were again part of the ETV news on 9 November 2020 (EBC, 2020m, 0:16:43-0:21:52). Citing a legal expert, ETV disseminated that the “junta” in Tigray committed acts of “terrorism”, according to the FDRE Proclamation 1176/2012 (Legal Expert Noh Takele, 9 November 2020; EBC, 2020m, 0:24:28-0:26:11). The Prime Minister said that “the aim of the operation we are conducting in the northern part of the country is to protect the country and its people, thus, its main focus is enforcing law” (EBC, 2020d, 0:00:10-0:00:31).

ETV used terms such as ‘extremist TPLF group’, ‘traitors’, ‘criminals’, ‘junta’ and ‘terrorists’ to represent the Tigray regional government (EBC, 2020i; EBC, 2020n). The term “ሕግ የማስከበር ዘመቻ” [law and order operation] was changed to “የሕግ ማስከበርና የህልውና ዘመቻ” [law enforcement and existential operation] frame on 11 November 2020 (EBC, 2020n, 0:00:47). The national media initially said that the law

and order operation would be finalised quickly, with the media framing the Prime Minister's discussions with the then Tigray Interim Government and the rehabilitation of Tigray as a priority agenda on 19 November 2020 (EBC, 2020o, 0:00:56-0:05:50).

Following the fall of Mekelle on 28 November 2020, the Chief of Staff of the ENDF Birhanu Julia said:

Congratulations to the people of Ethiopia. Our Defense force has accomplished its constitutional mandate of law and order mission while defending itself. The war from now onwards will be between police and concealed groups so that they will be captured to face the law. The war is over. For our Defense force already captured their last ford, the war is ended. Now it is time for us to capture concealed criminals and we will shortly disclose news about their capture. (EBC, 2020p, 0:06:38-0:08:17)

In a press release, the Tigray Prosperity Party, which was assigned by PM Abiy to administer Tigray, as the Tigray regional government had withdrawn to the highlands following the law enforcement operation, also reaffirmed that the fall of Mekelle was considered confirmation that the war was over (ETV, 2020p, 0:25:49-0:28:40). The head of the Tigray Prosperity Party, Nebiyu Sihul Mikael, stated:

Government's focused and careful action enabled the capture of Mekelle without civilian causality. This law and order operation is also the victory for the suppressed people of Tigray. As the people of Tigray was in deep-rooted oppression, this victory will pave the way to reinstating its development and prosperity agendas forward. (EBC, 2020p, 0:28:41-0:32:02)

In a parliamentary address, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed congratulated the people of Ethiopia on the accomplishment of the law enforcement and existential operation (EBC, 2020q). He said that "the heroism and contribution of the Ethiopian National Defence Force to the successful accomplishment of the law enforcement and existential operation was extraordinary" (ETV, 2020q, 0:20:35-0:20:47). He added "Mekelle had fallen and that not a single civilian was killed during the operation" (BBC, 2021a). However, it is common knowledge that there were many civilian fatalities, and even possibly war crimes (BBC, 2021b).

In addition, ETV, ENA and EPA similarly reported that no external force was involved in the Tigray war. Spokesperson for the Foreign Affairs Minister Dina Mufti in his media brief said:

The diplomatic front was also successful. Specially, the conversations made with Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo during the president's visit enabled them to understand the situation as an internal issue of Ethiopia. What they were concerned, including the Europeans, is humanitarian issues and civilian protection. But almost all are sympathetic to the sovereignty of Ethiopia and the law enforcement operation. (ETV, 2020g, 0:32:55-0:33:50)

The Ethiopian government claimed that the situation in Tigray was an internal affair (Abyssinia Media, 2020). After the declaration of war, the EPA headline referred to the completion of the law enforcement operation in a congratulatory tone: “As the curtain falls on TPLF”. The article reported as follows:

The noticeable symbolic change in the landscape is the irrevocable termination of TPLF, a prominent political and military power that had been destabilising and creating havoc in the nation's politics and the politics of the horn as well. (Solomon, 2020)

This framing of the TPLF and Tigray in-general was an extension of the Eritrean President Isayas Afwerki's “Weyane...Game over” utterance (ERi-TV, 2018a). Another EPA headline read that the “Swift law enforcement operation helps avoid the vicious circle of war and poverty”, again justifying the war (Getachew, 2020).

On 4 December 2020, the federal government of Ethiopia framed its operation in Tigray as “ወንጀለኞችን የማደንና የመልሶ ግንባታ ምዕራፍ” (assessing criminals and reconstruction chapter), following the claimed accomplishment of the operation (EBC, 2020g). This framing of the federal government was manifested through its national broadcaster, ETV, until 31 December 2020, which is the last date for the news data assessment for this research (EBC, 2020t). However, the Tigray war continued for two years after the federal government claimed victory, until de-escalation following the signing of the Pretoria Peace Agreement on 2 November 2022.

‘Devils back to Hell’: The war within a war

A retired Ethiopian military member who re-joined the ENDF following Prime Minister Abiy’s call (Fana Television, 2020a) during the Tigray war, Lieutenant General Bacha Debele, said on 12 November 2020:

These people are the devils who escaped from hell; they shall not live impersonated on the Earth. We shall not allow them to live like human being. We must turn them back to hell. (EBC, 2020b, 00:42:23-00:42:40)

On 28 November 2020, Ethiopian artist Debebe Eshetu stated:

November is about to end. They are getting warmth from the fire they are setting. As it is tempered, it is about to blow a fuse. I don’t feel any sympathy for their burning up. I say they deserve it. (Amhara Media Corporation, 2020)

Referring to the people of Tigray, on 5 September 2021, the President of Amhara Regional State, Agegnehu Teshagar, said:

These people [Tigrayans] are enemies to the people of Ethiopia. These people are enemies to Afar, enemies to Gambella, enemies to Somali. (Yabele Media, 2021a)

On 18 September 2021, Daniel Kibret, Social Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister, who has a background as deacon in Orthodox Church, said:

As you know, after the fall of Satan, there was nothing like Satan that was created... Satan was the last of his kind. And they (the TPLF) must also remain the last of their kind. There should be no land in this country which can sustain this kind of weed. (AFP, 2021)

Speaking to a televised gathering, he added:

We must exterminate them not only from their conformation, but they must be erased from public memory, from public knowledge, from historical archive in a way that a person like these people cannot be created again in this country. (Galama Dhugaa, 2021)²¹

Hence, it is clear that public officials used implicit terms that dehumanise Tigrinya speaking people. The national media, which

²¹ Original text, Daniel Kibret: “እንደነሱ አይነት ሰው ዳግም እንዳይፈጠር እዚች አገር ላይ እንዳይታሰብ ከመዋቅራዊ ቦታቸው ብቻ አይደለም ማሰወገድ ያለብን ከሰው ህሊና ከሰው ልቦና ውስጥ ከታሪክ መዝገብ ውስጥ ነው ተፍቆ መጥፋት ያለባቸው።” (Galama Dhugaa, 2021).

serve as mouthpieces of the federal government, served as vital channels of dissemination for ethnic slurs against Tigrayans.

Diagnostic and prognostic frames

Although, the media campaigns against Tigrayans were carried out over time, the state media (ETV, ENA and EPA) framed the law and order action on Tigray as the result of a surprise attack on the Northern Command of the ENDF:

The very reason that caused the law enforcement operation was the red line dashed by the TPLF clique via attacking the Northern Defense base behind. (Mengesha, 2020)

On 3 November 2020, in an ETV news report, the Amhara Prosperity Party accused the TPLF of being ‘devilish’ and causing civilian casualties, adding that military measures were the only solution:

The TPLF ruling group fortified in Mekelle is compromising the life of civilians for its political game. In addition, it has become a threat to national security, as it is the centre of crisis and terrorism. For the sustainability of peace in Ethiopia and the region [in-general], sidelining political sympathy, we assure you the right time to take active measures for a durable solution is today. (ETV, 2020c)

On the evening 8 pm prime time news broadcast on 10 November 2020, ETV reported on the ethnic conflict in Guliso district of Western Oromia and its casualties, attributing responsibility to the TPLF and Oromo Liberation Front (EBC, 2020c). But it did not mention why the ethnic conflict in Guliso happened at that moment. Exploring various sources, the Guliso ethnic conflict happened on 1 November 2020 (Al Jazeera, 2020b), three days before Prime Minister Abiy’s law enforcement operation declaration on Tigray. This raises the question as to why the divisions of the ENDF that used to be stationed in those areas were not in position to prevent or stop the Guliso conflict. As reported by Al Jazeera (2020b) the “Sunday’s attack on Gawa Qanqa village in Guliso District of West Welega Zone took place a day after government forces unexpectedly left the area”. In addition, a former member of the Ethiopia People’s Revolutionary Party, Yared Tibebu, stated “the Guliso massacre on Sunday, 1st November 2020 was as a result of the mobilisation of the

17th, 21st, 22nd, 24th and 25th divisions of the ENDF from different areas of the country including Welega to border areas of Tigray, on standby for the war” (Yabele Media, 2021b). He added “the [Ethiopian] government and even the opposition parties were misleading the public with a false narrative that the [Tigray] war broke out as a result of the attack on the [Northern Command] military base” (Yabele Media, 2021).

On 3 November 2020, the Ethiopian parliament requested the executive body of the government to take measures against the TPLF and Oromo Liberation Front, demanding that: “If possible, the government must take strong military action against them, if not they must be enlisted as terrorists, so that they must be legally liable” (EBC, 2020c, 0:11:08-0:11:22).

Although mobilisation of the ENDF military was the immediate cause of the Guliso massacre, the national media outlets attributed surprise attack on the Northern Command as the cause of the declared law enforcement action.

Lieutenant General Bacha Debele said:

They started the operation before a week at night 10pm LT. They cut the communication channel of the command. And they took the rations of the soldiers. They encircled each brigade and requested them to hand over their munitions so that they can allow the soldier to go wherever they want. Those who were thirsty requested water and food so that they will hand over. Immediately as they got water and food they regrouped themselves and went out fighting to where so ever they wanted. (ETV, 2020d, 0:03:06–0:04:08)

Talking about the situation he added that they danced over the bodies of the soldiers. He added:

For those who were in the same ford, for those who fought side by side against Shaebiya [a term used to describe Eritrea], except the soldiers from Oromo Liberation Front and the [Tigray] Special Forces, they know each other with militias who used to attend fords together. The people in the localities also know the soldiers. For those who martyred soldiers of the ENDF, they took off their clothes and exposed them to sun. Their bodies are not buried till this day. The bodies were deformed and it was left to vultures and hyenas. For the soldiers who spent 21 years in the same fords together, they killed the soldiers and danced over the bodies after

they took off the clothes. When they bury the bodies of their comrades, they danced over the ENDF soldiers' bodies. (ETV, 2020d, 0:06:15–0:07:46)

ETV used emotionally charged language to describe the graphic details of the attack on the Northern Command, instead of providing substantive figures, like how many soldiers were killed and wounded during the attack (EBC, 2020d; 2020e).

In relation to media content, the results show that different actors, especially state actors, extensively used the media to mobilise the Ethiopian people against Tigrayans in Ethiopia. Similar to how RTLM was instrumental in disseminating hate speech, including by using terms like ‘cockroach’, to dehumanise the Tutsi in Rwanda (Forges, 2007), Tigrinya speakers were depicted by Ethiopian media as less than human with the use of terms such as ‘weeds’, ‘cancer’, ‘monsters’, ‘ghosts’, ‘traitors’, ‘homosexuals’, and ‘devils’ who has betrayed their country (Fana Television, 2018a). Ethiopians were called to stand together to exterminate the ‘sea’ (metaphoric reference to ethnic Tigrayans), as the only means to avoid the ‘deformed fish’ (metaphoric reference to the TPLF/EPRDF) (Tghat, 2021).

In addition, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed used the term ‘daylight hyena’ attributing the Meskel Square bombing to Tigrayans in the aftermath of the attempt on Prime Minister Abiy’s life on 23 June 2018 (EBC, 2018). This term was picked up and mainstreamed by the state media (EBC, 2018). In addition, Prime Minister Abiy pointed to Tigrayans as instigators of violence in Ethiopia (Yethiopia News, 2018). Such utterances by the country’s Prime Minister were interpreted as a signal to continue the character assassination, dehumanisation, and ethnic profiling of Tigrayans. The Diaspora media, ESAT, went so far as to call on Ethiopians to mobilise to annihilate Tigrayans as an umbrella frame of their campaign against the EPRDF, triggering youth movements in Oromia and Amhara (Tghat, 2021).

ETV, ENA and EPA used thematic framing to define the attack on the Northern Command of the ENDF as treason, claiming that the TPLF had used every means to destroy the country over the last 47 years (Solomon, n.d.). The ENA portrayed the impact of the war in

Tigray and its people as either minimal collateral damage (episodic framing) or claimed that the TPLF intentionally destroyed infrastructure in Tigray (Ethiopian News Agency, 2020c). Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed also used episodic framing, such as: “these [Tigrayan] women are raped by men while our soldiers are slaughtered with bayonets” (EBC, 2021, 00:08:45-00:08:51) to dismiss reports by the international media alleging that sexual and gender-based violence were used against the people of Tigray as a weapon of war (Kassa, 2021b). The EPA presented the extermination of the people of Tigray as a solution in its headline, “Swift law enforcement operation helps avoid the vicious circle of war and poverty” (Getachew, 2020).

Organisational connections

The research found that although media reform was one of the promises that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed was recognised for, the media in Ethiopia is tightly controlled by the government and the ruling party. In addition, the federal government controls and manipulates the media to homogenise information and silence alternative perspectives, to enforce its narrative.

Controlling the media

At the federal level, the state owned and party affiliated media are patronised by the government through salary boosts, which went up to double in 2020, and their content is politically motivated, controlled and filtered through loyal politically-nominated personalities at each media house put there to monitor media practices (Interviewees ETFGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022).

At the same time, the then Ethiopia Broadcast Authority (EBA) (now Ethiopia Media Authority) was in charge of implementing the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation 1185/2020 (Republic of Ethiopia, 2020), which prohibits the dissemination of ethnic hatred. However, it appears that through its application the purpose of this proclamation was in fact to intimidate the media and suppress critical voices. In this regard, a former member of editorial team in one of the national media said:

While allowing the state media engage in dehumanisation campaigns against ethnic Tigrayans, the Ethiopia Broadcast Authority wrote a warning to the local media in Tigray. It was instrumented as a means to suppress critical voices of the Tigray war. (Interviewee ETFGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 202)

The focus group discussants who worked as reporters up to editorial team members, for national media outlets based in Addis Ababa and Tigray added that the media houses at the federal level are ardent supporters of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's reform initiatives and see Tigrayans as a stumbling block to Ethiopia's unity. A former editorial team member of a national media outlet who wants to remain anonymous shared the following observations:

Although there were influences that were critical of the government before, we were trying to evaluate issues based on news value. A few months after [Prime Minister] Abiy Ahmed came to power, the measurement criteria of news value dramatically changed. Issues that dehumanise ethnic Tigrayans and downgrade TPLF leadership as responsible for all abuses became the salient news items and a main theme of the media. (Interviewees ETFGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

A reporter from another national media outlet said:

The field reports I was assigned by the news department, of the media I work for, were congruent with the political motives of the government. The government used the Raya and Welkayit issues²² as an agenda to mobilise other Ethiopians against

²² Raya is the cultural nameplate for the communities living in the Southern Zone of Tigray while Welkayit is one of the woredas (districts) administered under the Western Zone of Tigray (Negarit Gazzeta, 1995). Explaining the historical perspectives, Leule Ras Mengesha Seyoum Mengesh, who ruled Tigray from 1953–1965 Ethiopian Calendar (E.C.), stated that Raya, Welkayit and Tsegede were administered under Tigray province until 1948 E.C. during the rule of Hailesslassie, where the border for Raya was Alweha Milash, while Welkayit and Tsegede were fully administered under the Tigray province (Dimtsi Weyane Television, 2019; Nyssen, 2022). Then Raya (the border changed from Alweha Milash to Kobo) was changed to be administered under Wollo province in 1948 E.C., while Welkayit and Tsegede were changed to Begemidir province (border changed to Tekeze Milash) in 1949 E.C. by the then National Border Minister (Dimtsi Weyane Television, 2019). Following the census in 1984, given the fact that the majority of communities living in the areas were Tigrayans, Raya and Welkayit were readjusted to their

Tigray. Once I sent a report that shows the friendly neighbourhood among the people of Alamata of Tigray and Kobo of Amhara, it was rejected for dissemination. What I understood from such continuous trends is that they want my news to flame the political tit for tats into outright conflict. The media were instruments for igniting conflict but not for peace. (Interview REIDI02, Interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 18 June 2022)

A coordinator of one of the national media outlets shared the following:

[The usual] editorial policy, that we all have adhered to in the news selection and production process, was sidelined to let the government officials intervene in our daily routines in the name of endorsing the reform. We used to report the reality on the ground but they urge us to send them news that explains Tigray is instable as opposed to the reality on the ground. (Interviewees COFGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

A former member of an editorial team in one of the national media said that the media management routinely received agenda and directions from the Press Secretariat of the Prime Minister, which went down to the editorial members (Interviewees ET1FGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to face, 22 June 2022). In addition, religious institutions, opposition parties and private institutions were all sources of information in support of the government's position on media content.

According to the focus group discussants, the measures taken by the government to silence critical voices on the Tigray war included the blocking of local media – including Tigray TV, Dimtsi Woyane TV, Tigray Media House (TMH), Assena TV and Oromia Media Network (OMN) – from using satellites to broadcast their programmes (Interviewees FGD, focus group discussion with S. E. Geb & Daniel T., face-to-face, 22 June 2022). The federal government also arrested journalists Bekalu Almirew from Awlo Media (on 4 November 2020), Haftom G/Egizabeher, Tsegaye Hagos and Abreha Hagos from

historical status of being administered in Southern and Western zones of Tigray (Office of the Population and Housing Census Commission, 1991). Since then, some part of Raya and the entire Western Tigray including Welkayit woreda, have been annexed by the Amhara militia and Eritrean army.

Ethiopia Press Agency as well as Medhanie Ekubamichael from Addis Standard (on 7 November 2020) and Dawit Kebede from Awramba Times (on 30 November 2020), accusing them of disseminating false information and defaming the Ethiopian government (Mahlet, 2020a). Journalists Medhanie Ekubamichael, Haftom G/Egizabeher, Tsegay Hagos, Abreha Hagos, and Dawit Kebede are ethnic Tigrayans.

Following the fall of Mekelle on 30 November 2020, journalists in Tigray TV were ordered to describe the ousted government and Tigray Defence Forces as a 'junta', discrediting the TPLF (Interviewees FGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022). Tigray TV journalist Dawit Kebede Araya was shot dead in Mekelle in January 2021 while the city was in the hands of federal authorities and Oromia Broadcasting Network journalist Sisay Fida was killed in May 2021 (Mumo, 2022). One of the focus group discussants said that "the extrajudicial killing of Dawit made us fearful for our lives let alone reveal the atrocities committed by the warring parties" (Interviewees FGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022).

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) ranked Ethiopia the second worst jailer of journalists in sub-Saharan Africa after Eritrea (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021b). The CPJ documented the arrest of at least 63 journalists and media professionals following the law and order action on 4 November 2020, at least 8 of whom remain detained as of 1 August 2022 (Mumo, 2022). The CPJ census disclosed the list of journalists in jail in 2021, including Associated Press (AP) contributor Amir Aman Kiyaro with his Cameraman Thomas Engida (freelance on 28 November), Bikila Amenu and Dessu Dulla (Oromia News Network on 18 November), Ermias Tesfaye (Ethiopia Insight 3 November), Hirsi Mohamed Mahad, Ibrahim Hussein and Salman Mukhtar (Nabad TV, 10 November), Kibrom Worku (Ahadu Radio and Television, 26 October), Mekonnen Yibrah and Teklehaimanot Girmai (EBC, 16 November), Melese Diribsa (Oromia Media Network, as of 2 July 2020) and Tesfa-Alem Tekle (Nation Media Group, 31 October) (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021a; Mumo, 2021).

Awlo Media and Ethio Forum online media journalists Bekalu Alamrew, Yayesew Shimeles, Abebe Bayu, Fana Negash, Fanuel Kinfu and Meheret Gebrekirstos were captured by security between 30 June and 2 July 2021 and detained in Awash Arba for 49 days (Mahlet, 2021b). In addition, Addisu Muluneh (from FBC, on 28 November 20), Eyasped Tesfaye (Ubuntu TV on 7 December), Meaza Mohammed (Roha TV, 11 December) and Tamrat Negera (Terara Network, 10 December) were arrested by security personnel (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021b; Mumo, 2021).

The killing, arrest and intimidation of journalists, as well as political pressure from the government, resulted in the closure of online media alternatives working from Ethiopia, including Ethio Forum, and Awlo Media, causing many journalists to continue their work abroad (Mumo, 2021; Mahlet, 2020a; Mahlet, 2020b). Addis Standard was also suspended by Ethiopia Media Authority for a week for using the term ‘Tigray Defence Forces’ in its news about the war (Mumo, 2022).

According to Reporters Without Borders, many journalists, including Meaza Mohammed of Roha TV, Sabontu Ahmed of Finfinnee Integrated Broadcasting, Solomun Shumye of Gebeyanu Media and Yayesew Shimelis of Ethio Forum Media were arrested between 19 and 28 May 2022, while Dessu Dulla and Bikila Amenu of Oromia News Network were arrested on 3 June 2022 (Reporters Without Borders, 2022b).

Consistent with local media control, the international media were also denied access to Tigray until 24 February 2021 (Henok, 2021). Even after some of the media were allowed access, the federal government used various techniques including posing threats to the journalists and expelling journalists who disclosed atrocities on the ground. Ethiopia warned the media in its official statement “the government will continue to take irreversible measure on individuals involved in illegal activities who are planning and working to create havoc and chaos, also on those wearing a cloak of media outlets and journalists” (Obulutsa, 2022).

Three days after a few of the international media entered Tigray, “on February 27, soldiers arrested two translators-Fitsum Berhane,

working with an Agence France-Press (AFP) news crew and Alula Akalu, working with the Financial Times (FT)-and a local reporter and fixer Tamrat Yemane” (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021c). BBC Tigrinya reporter Girmay Gebru was also detained on 1 March 2021 (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021c).

Reporters Without Borders indicated:

These arbitrary arrests and proceedings are worrying and pose an additional threat to journalism in a country where it was already constrained by the effects of the fighting between government forces and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). Some Ethiopian journalists such as Lucy Kasa, a freelancer working for several foreign media including Al Jazeera, have been forced to leave the country to escape the threats they were receiving in connection with their work. She was physically attacked in her Addis Ababa home in February 2021 by three men who accused her of “spreading lies” and supporting “the Tigray junta.” Foreign journalists have not been spared either. Tom Gardner, The Economist magazine’s correspondent in Addis Ababa, was expelled on 16 May, three days after the authorities withdrew his accreditation. Simon Marks, an Addis Ababa-based reporter for the New York Times, was forced to leave in May 2021 without any prior warning or official explanation by the government. (Reporters Without Borders, 2022a)

Tigray TV employees Teshome Temalew, Misgena Seyoum, Haben Halefom, Hailemichael Gesesse, and Dawit Meknonnen were also arrested in Mekelle by Tigray regional authorities in July 2022, on the charge of working with the enemy (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2022).

Referring to the state’s stringent control over the media, a journalist based in Addis Ababa, who is an anonymous source for Deutsche Welle (DW), described the level of control and intimidation by the federal government as follows: “I’ve had meetings with media authority officials. They were saying, ‘It’s your country. You have to defend the national interest’” (Laurent, 2022). The government of Ethiopia used various means to repress the disclosure of atrocities in Tigray, including arrest, abduction and intimidation on the members of local and international media, revoking licenses and permits as well as expelling media professionals (Salem, 2020).

Media manipulation: Disinformation as a strategy

As stated in the focus group discussion, the government used various ways of conveying one-sided information about the war, including disinformation, strategically and in the name of fact-checking (Interviewees ETFGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022). Among the documentaries that depicted ethnic Tigrayans as perpetrators of human rights violations, *Yeginbot Haya Dil Yekelebesew Yegjefgnoch Bedel*, which was disseminated by ETV, Walta TV, Fana Television and various other media, showed an interview with Lidya Mohammed, who was presented as a victim of abuse and physical attacks by Tigrayan security personnel perpetrators while in prison during the rule of the EPRDF (Walta TV, 2020). Although EPRDF was criticised for human rights violations, she disclosed on Tigray Television that the abuse that happened to her took place after Abiy Ahmed became Prime Minister, not during the time of the EPRDF and not by Tigrayan perpetrators (TMMA, 2020).

A former editorial member of ETV said:

The management of ETV were in a position to direct the editorial team at ETV to provide full support to [Prime Minister] Abiy's reform. They were politically nominated by Prosperity Party to run the media. As they already have endorsed the values of the Prosperity Party as pillars of the nation, the disinformation employed was at the cost of credibility, and professionalism was compromised. (Interviewees ET1FGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

As explained in the focus group discussion, disinformation was used to manipulate information in the Tigray war.

An editor in one of the national media outlets shared the following:

The government systematically closed all means of communication in Tigray, so as to prevent reports of atrocities in Tigray. In addition, disinformation was instrumented as a means of stemming and disregarding the reports by international institutions. In my 30-years of experience, for the first time, I witnessed how disinformation floods can be made strategically and tactically, resulting in the manipulation of the narrative about the Tigray war. (Interviewees EDFGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

The state's organisational connections with the media were used to control the media and the information it disseminated, including through communication blackouts and the manipulation of media content. The state's organisational connection was manifested through state ownership of media, assigning politically loyal media management and political-economic influences. Some media professionals were loyal to the ruling party and defied editorial good practice to speak to partisan audiences who supported the Ethiopian government's position of war against Tigray. Although direct (one-to-one) organisational connections among media and party (a medium serving a party at a particular time) have "mostly died out", as explained by Hallin and Mancini (2004), the findings of this research show that many media organisations in Ethiopia were serving one alliance, i.e., many to one. Most of the mainstream media based in Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar, Adama and Hawassa were serving the alliance (federal government of Ethiopia etc.) and portrayed Tigrayans as anti-Ethiopian unity. Thus, the research found that the component of political parallelism, which Hallin and Mancini (2004) explain as manifestations of the media during the 20th century, but which are not common in modern day media system, are still the defining characteristics of the state media in Ethiopia.

Tendency for media personnel to be active in political life

During the war on Tigray, journalists working in the state media used terms such as 'anti-reform' and 'threat to national security' in their reports about the TPLF (Ethiopian News Agency, 2020a). A senior editor working for a national media house said:

During my 30-years working [in the media], I have observed journalists in Ethiopia as instruments of party politics. I think today's journalism is a manifestation of that. But what made it worse [in the Tigray war] is that its intentions were not only based on the political divide, but on the inflammation of ethnic hatred against Tigrayan identity. (Interviewee EDIDI01, interview with Tesfa., face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

Journalists working for national media organisations based in Addis Ababa and Tigray described being harassed as 'traitors', 'anti Ethiopian', and 'anti-reform' by their colleagues, who saw themselves

as proponents of the Prosperity Party, during the general meetings held in their respective head offices in Addis Ababa (Interviewees FGD, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022). A former editorial team member at one of the national media outlets said:

Regardless of the position they have, even if lower than mine, many of the colleagues with whom I had close friendships began to plot against me, on the assumption that I may not be the best fit to support [Prime Minister] Abiy's reforms. Editorial discussions were dominated by [Prime Minister] Abiy Ahmed's pro-reformist proponents and handful professionals who do not require the media to be run professionally, but who label Tigrayan journalists as 'anti-reform'. (Interviewees ED1FGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

In addition, a former editorial member of a national media outlet explained that Tigrayan members of the editorial team were banned from participating in the editorial meetings:

Tigrayan members of the editorial team were prohibited from participating, because it was believed that Tigrayans may not support [Prime Minister] Abiy's 'Medemer' [philosophy for Ethiopia's unity] heartily. The proponents of the Prosperity Party even suspected that we may blow the secrets of the reform. As a result I was barred from the editorial meetings. (Interviewees ED1FGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

Following the declaration of the law enforcement, journalists informed the Ethiopian public that the law enforcement operation was a successful and a sustainable solution to the unity of Ethiopians (EBC, 2020g). ETV reporter, Solomon Abegaz, concluded in his report “the law enforcement operation by the ENDF actualised civilians to live in a peaceful environment” (EBC, 2020h), despite the fact that the ENDF has been accused of perpetrating massive atrocities in Tigray (Feleke *et al.*, 2021). In an ETV newscast on 3 December 2020, journalists who were reporting from the war fronts discussed details of how the northern division was betrayed, without mentioning the civilian casualties all the way from Dansha to Aksum, Zalambessa to Mariam Dengelat to Mekele, Maytsebri through

Temben to Samre, in line with the domination of public opinion by the Prosperity Party (EBC, 2020h).

Before, during and after the Tigray war, there was also a tendency for media personnel to be active politically. Following the nomination of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister, the state media swiftly joined the campaign, attributing responsibility for the abuses perpetrated all over the country to Tigrayans. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's portrayal of the 27-years of EPRDF rule as "years of darkness" (Sew, 2019), coupled with Isayas Afewerki's of Eritrea's utterance of "Weyane ... game over" (ERI-TV, 2018a), were a signal for the Ethiopian media to keep going, culminating in a series of documentaries depicting 'Tigrinya speakers' as solely responsible for human rights violations in the country.

The media in Ethiopia thematically blamed the TPLF, Tigray Defence Forces and Tigrayans in-general as responsible for all of the losses that were incurred as the result of the Tigray war (Mulatu, 2020). Media professionals in ETV, ENA and EPA reported the trends of the Tigray war in line with the position of the Prosperity Party, in search of political favour for their future ambitions. As opposed to their editorial policy, the media disseminated ethnic hatred against Tigrayans to mobilise public in support of Tigray war. The journalists working for the state media considered themselves to be loyal servants of the government and proponents of the Prosperity Party-led reforms, rather than providers of objective information.

Partisanship of the media audience

There are indicators that the general public supported the claims of the government, which were widely and dominantly disseminated through the media in rallies, that Tigrayans were a threat to national unity and security (EBC, 2020c, 0:39:35). A reporter in one of the national media outlets shared the following:

It is hard to think about this war without thinking about the inflammatory role of the media. It is the media that mobilised the 'we' Ethiopians to stand against the 'other' enemy, Tigrayans, so as to preserve Ethiopia's unity. The ethnic hatred, the dehumanisation, the deception – all of these efforts were instrumentalised by the

media for effect. (Interviewee REIDI02, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 18 May 2022)

While committing atrocities, soldiers were also reported to have repeated words disseminated by the media like “junta you deserve not to live in this earth” (Feleke, Mackintosh, Mezzofiore, Polglase & Elbagir, 2021). The word “two bullet is enough for junta” used by ENDF soldiers while massacring civilians in Mahbere Deگو is one such instance (Feleke, Mackintosh, Mezzofiore, Polglase & Elbagir, 2021), showing how the media affected the audience.

A senior editor in one of the national media organisations stated:

Although the profession demands that the media minimise harm during conflict, the media were an instrument for the inflammation of the bloody war [in Tigray], a weapon used to mobilise Ethiopians against Tigrayans through false narratives. They even framed annihilating Tigrayans as a sustainable solution to the crisis. (Interviewee EDIDI01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 25 May 2022)

A CNN report described how soldiers, while gang raping Tigrayan women, said that they were cleansing their Tigrayan bloodline (Feleke, Mackintosh, Mezzofiore, Polglase, Elbagir, Arvanitidis & Platt, 2021). Similarly, Al Jazeera reported a story of a woman who was gang raped by Amhara militia and was told that they do not want a “Tigrayan womb to give birth” (Kassa, 2021b).

A former editorial member of one of the national media organisations shared the following:

The war was first inflamed in the media. Strategically, the media classified ‘us’ and ‘them’, created a conducive environment for action against Tigrayans through dehumanisation and ethnic based hate speech, then called Ethiopians to wage war against Tigray. I understand the political factors, but I believe that the Ethiopian media made the war that happen wear its worst face. (Interviewees ET1FGD, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

In line with this, a news piece published by EPA that promoted war and conflict as a “major agent of change though neglected by

politicians” is another example of the level of media partisanship (Getachew, 2020).

The media audiences were, politically, partisan. In an effort to influence public perception about Tigrayans, state and ruling-party affiliated media – ETV, FBC, Walta TV, AMN, OBN, AMC, Debub TV and even private media including ESAT – disseminated the documentaries *Yefitih Sekoka* and *Shiwoch Yetesevulet Yeginbot Haya Dil Yekelebesew Yegjegnuch Bedel* describing ‘Tigrinya speakers’ as murderers comparable to Adolf Hitler in World War II. The documentary attributed responsibility for all human rights violations in Tigray to the ethnically-inclusive group ‘Tigrinya speakers’, blaming all ethnic Tigrayans as a whole. This finding supports Tronvoll’s analysis, that although Tigrayans themselves were among the victims of maladministration, corruption and abuses, they increasingly became the target of hate speech and ethnic slurs in Ethiopia, as they were collectively blamed for the authoritarian rule and maladministration by the EPRDF (Tronvoll, 2020).

The narrative established by the Ethiopian media that the Tigray war was declared following the attack on the Northern Command of ENDF was accepted by the masses. The general public supported the claims of the government that Tigrayans were a threat to national unity and security, which were widely and dominantly disseminated by the media and in rallies (EBC, 2020c, 0:39:35). The members of the ENDF also repeated terms such as ‘junta’, ‘snake and ‘terrorist’ while massacring civilians in Tigray (Feleke *et al.*, 2021). The utterance “two bullet is enough for junta” used by ENDF soldiers while massacring civilians in Mahbere Dego (Feleke *et al.*, 2021), the expressed aim of soldiers to cleansing the Tigrayan bloodline by gang raping women in Tigray (Feleke *et al.*, 2021), and the Amhara militia saying that they don’t want a “Tigrayan womb to give birth” (Kassa, 2021b) are all examples of how the media affected actors in the war. The media mobilised people, explaining the importance of the Tigray war as “major agent of change though neglected by politicians” (Getachew, 2020).

Journalistic role orientations and practices

The state media – ETV, ENA and EPA – used terms such as ‘junta’ ‘power mongers’, ‘betrayers’, and ‘traitors’, all coined by the Prosperity Party to refer to Tigrayans (Ethiopian News Agency, 2020c). The focus group discussants also explained that the documentary *Yefitib Sekoka* was produced by a composite crew from various media stations loyal to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (Interviewees FGD, focus group discussion with S. E. Geb & Daniel T., face-to-face, 22 Jun 2022). The senior editor of one of the major Ethiopian news outlets stated as follows:

As an editorial approach, we were sending our news issues, action plans to the head office and carrying out our reporting. But months after PM Abiy Ahmed came to power, the head office began sending top-down plans for news issues, rejecting our action plans. And they swiftly censored us from reporting on the political issues in Tigray a year before the declaration of war in Tigray. I have witnessed the ENA dumping one quarter of the news we sent them for dissemination. Lately, we have stood empty, as we were not allowed to report even social and economic affairs in Tigray. We have faced unprofessional pressure from head office. (Interviewee EDIDI01, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 25 May 2022)

A reporter in one of the national media outlets described an event that took place during his field report assignment:

Our crew in Mekelle was ordered by the Head of Assignment Desk to interview a youth group during the unrest in Alamata. When we reach there the youth, whom we were ordered to interview, were positioning the unrest as an ethnic conflict. Although there is constitutionally demarked territorial definition which our editorial policy was guided by for decades, the youth were claiming Alamata as Amhara. I called the Head that our report shouldn't be framed by ethnic portrayal, especially considering the principle of minimising harm in journalism. But he insisted that I report it through an ethnic frame. I decided to quit this job, as my journalism shouldn't serve to maximise the conflict. But I paid a price for it; I was suspended from my organisation for a week. (Interviewee REIDI02, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 18 May 2022)

A senior reporter from another national media outlet described the following:

We were an imperfect match; what my news room was demanding in the last four years [before the war] was to frame every death in Tigray as a manifestation of the TPLF's suppression. But what I found on the ground was that these death were [usually] the result of quarrels between individuals. When I tried to make them understand the situation, they continued insisting that it be reported thematically, as a deliberate action by the incumbent government in Tigray, and even to add the number of casualties. This happened in my field report assignment to Adet [a district in Central Zone of Tigray] in March 2020. A man died while fighting because of personal disagreement with the perpetrator. The head office called me to report it as if it was done by the TPLF and add to the number of deaths to bring it to a total of 15. I handed the contact number of the person who was investigating the case to the head office and quit reporting it. (Interviewees REFGD01, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022)

Journalists from ETV and ENA explained that the state media were in a position to disseminate sensational and even disinformation to mobilise Tigrayan youth to stand against the government in Tigray in 2018–2020 (Interviewees FGD, focus group discussion with Equar and Tesfa, face-to-face, 22 June 2022).

Reinforcing state propaganda: Source and anti-others narratives

The media in Ethiopia were under direct inspection by the Prime Minister's Press Secretariat, following the dismantling of the former Government Communication Affairs Minister (Interviewees FGD, focus group discussion with S. E. Geb & Daniel T., face-to-face, 22 June 2022). Journalists witnessed the introduction of a centralised information provision system, controlled by government-affiliated officials, which became the main source of information. The Prime Minister's Spokeswoman, Billene Seyoum, told Reuters that “the state of emergency prohibits unauthorised entities from disseminating activities from the front via various channels including media” (Reuters, 2021). In addition, the federal government Communication Service declared new restrictions on information about the Tigray war:

Battlefront updates can only come from the government. Disseminating information on military manoeuvres, war front updates and results via any medium is forbidden

except for information provided by a Joint Civilian-Military Command set up to oversee a state of emergency. (Reuters, 2021)

Information related to the Tigray war was solely provided by government and ruling party officials, with other means of seeking information being restricted, including by intimidation and on the pretext of national sovereignty. The restrictions included, but were not limited to, Internet shutdown in Tigray, denial of information access requests and travel requests of the international media to Tigray until 24 February 2021, intimidation, harassment and removal of permissions of journalists who published narratives contrary to the dominant narrative. State actors, allied religious and opinion leaders were the main sources of information and used the media to suppress information about the atrocities committed during the war. The then member of communication leadership in the Interim Government explained:

We had pressure from the federal government, which insisted on meddling with the media professionals heading to Tigray. I remember some international media crews coming to Mekelle with military security personnel from the ENDF. When the crew began interviewing survivors in an IDP camp in Mekelle, their translators were mistranslating what was said by the survivors of the bloody war. As the public blared in disagreement with the translators, the security personnel swiftly ordered the journalists to evacuate justifying security reasons. But the journalists refused and rerun their interview afresh. (Interviewee COIDI03, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 15 June 2022)

The source further stated that when some of the international media selected translators from Mekelle, the government immediately arrested the translators (Interviewee COIDI03, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 15 June 2022).

The ENDF and state media were closely connected, even establishing a collaborative media-military information dissemination task force at every front in the Tigray war. Profiled military staff were appointed as media coordinators to monitor what was reported by the media; the North West Front Media Coordinator is one of the military structures installed by ENDF (Ethiopian News Agency, 2020b). A

then member of communication leadership said the following about control of the media by the military:

... the national media and the military coordinated engagements by establishing a media-military task force in charge of editions, so as to control and monopolise the provision of information. (Interviewee COIDI03, interview with Tesfa, face-to-face, 15 June 2022)

Some of the state media awarded their journalists for favouring the federal government when reporting military operations. Hence, more than 70 loyal media professionals, from EPA, ETV, ENA, FBC, Walta TV, AMN, AMC, OBN, ESAT and others, led by the military commanders, were reporting from war fronts, while critical media voices were sidelined (Tewodros, 2020).

Religious leaders, scholars, artists, athletes, business elites and other influential people were among the sources of information spreading hate speech against ethnic Tigrayans, which falls into the ‘anti-others’ filter. Among them, Daniel Kibret, a public official and deacon in Orthodox Church, described Tigrayans as sneaks who must not be allowed to live on this Earth as humans (Tebta Mar, 2019); Lieutenant General Bacha Debele compared Tigrayans with the Devil (EBC, 2020b); artist Debebe Eshetu compared Tigrayans with hyenas (Amhara Media Corporation, 2020); and the former President of Amhara Regional State Agegnehu Teshagar said that the people of Tigray were the enemy of all Ethiopians (Yabele Media, 2021a). An Ethiopian Orthodox Church priest was quoted as saying:

All of them [Tigrayans], both intellectuals and the ordinary people are mad. So if a person is mad, before a hyena eats you, you better eat it and be blessed. The government called for a ceasefire for the sake of reconciliation assuming the criminals will surrender; however, since they [the Tigrayans] are mad to accept the reality, we priests have to baptise them with fire. If they refuse water they have to be baptised with fire. (Theodros, 2022)

On top of this, Ethiopian Orthodox Church Bahir Dar Synod Chief Executive, Melakeselam Efram Mulualem, and Amhara Regional Muslim Higher Council President, Shek Seid Mohammed, described Tigrayans as ‘anti-religion’, calling Ethiopians to join the law and

order enforcement measures by the government (Amhara Media Corporation, 2021).

These high-profile sources used their position as opinion leaders to reinforce the Ethiopian government's position, repeating the narrative about the need to enforce law and order and to fight against the threat to national security posed by the people of Tigray to justify the Tigray war. As one of the main 'news filters' in examining how sources can be instrumental in manufacturing consent, the media in Ethiopia used public officials and their allies to contribute to the creation of biased public knowledge among Ethiopians, and beyond, counter to the realities of the Tigray war on the ground (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

The sources – public officials, alleged victims and opinion leaders – classified 'Tigrinya speakers' as the main national threat throughout Ethiopian history (EBC, 2020b). Thus, these trusted sources used their credibility to manufacture consent for the Tigray war, on the pretext that it was necessary to protect Ethiopian unity and sovereignty by annihilating the 'anti-Ethiopian unity', 'anti-religion', 'anti-reform' and non-human 'others', namely, 'Tigrinya speakers'.

In relation to propaganda theory, the research showed that the source of information and 'anti-others' filters were widely used in creating and maintaining the narratives spread by the federal government to justify the Tigray war. One of the main propaganda narratives was that the war was a necessary internal law and order enforcement operation that targeted 'terrorists' in Tigray. Tigrayans were classified as 'anti-Ethiopian unity' and 'anti-religion' by public officials, religious leaders, artists, business elites and other influential personalities. These narratives and the vilification of 'Tigrinya speakers' as the enemy of Ethiopian unity are indicative of the fact that the decision to declare war on Tigray was already established in the minds of the government before the TPLF attack on the Northern Command of the ENDF. However, despite this, the Ethiopian media framed the declaration of war as if it happened suddenly, after the Northern Command was attacked (Ethiopian News Agency, 2020d). Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's media brief denounced the Tigray election as an automatic declaration of war

three months before (Haq Ena Saq ሃቅ ክና ሳቅ, 2020). Although ETV did report the massacre in Guliso district in Western Oromia, which occurred days before the attack on the Northern Command, it did not question why the military personnel had left the area, or where they had gone (EBC, 2020c).

Discussion

This research explored the role of the media in Ethiopia in creating and disseminating narratives on the Tigray war. The research used Hallin and Mancini's (2004) political parallelism and McNair's (2011) propaganda model as a theoretical framework. The research found that the Ethiopian media portrayed the Tigray war from the position of the Ethiopian government. Turning first to political parallelism, this research looked at each component: media content, organisational connections, the tendency for media personnel to be active in political life, partisanship of media audiences, and journalistic role orientations and practices. From the perspective of propaganda theory, it assessed the use of source and anti-others frames.

The use of trusted sources, including public officials, military strategists, religious leaders, business elites, artists and other influential people, in the hate speech campaign lent credibility to the narrative, which proposed annihilating Tigrayans as the only means of maintaining national unity in Ethiopia. Similarly, Skjerdal and Mulatu (2020) found that annihilation and othering were the major frames used by the media when reporting on Tigray. The role of Ethiopia's national media in mobilising Ethiopians against Tigrayans can be explained by Herman and Chomsky's (1988) 'anti others' filter.

This research focused on exploring how the Tigray war was framed from the perspective of the national media outlets, it did not explore the Tigrayan media (which continued from the Diaspora) and international media's portrayal of the war. Documentations and updates from the EEPA Situation Report and online outlet Tghat were used to distinguish major timelines of the war, which are important inputs for further exploration. The social media campaigns, including on Facebook and Twitter, by Diaspora supporters of all the

warring parties is also worth exploring. The communication blackout of Tigray, which lasted for a year and five months, as well as its effects in the social interaction in this digitalised world is also an interesting topic of investigation. And, most importantly, the effect of the hate speech, dehumanisation and ethnic slurs from the perspective of the victims and perpetrators is an area of research that needs critical scrutiny.

Conclusion

This research examined the role of Ethiopian media in the Tigray war, highlighting its use by the government to spread disinformation and further its agenda. The research uses Hallin and Mancini's polarised pluralist model, Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, and Entman's framing theory to analyse factors such as media content, organisational connections, journalists' political activities, media audience partisanship, and journalistic practices. These factors are indicators of political parallelism, while the filters of the propaganda model include the source of information and 'anti-others' sentiment. The study also uses Iyengar's diagnostic and prognostic frames to present the results.

The research integrates criteria from these theories to explore how the political narrative of the Tigray war was established and reinforced through media content, the media system, and government organisational connections. This integration helped examine the establishment and maintenance of the narrative surrounding the Tigray war.

Key indicators include:

- Political parallelism: Media's alignment with political entities, journalists' political activities, and audience partisanship
- Propaganda model: Media content influenced by information sources and anti-others sentiment
- Framing theories: Diagnostic and prognostic frames used to shape public perception of the Tigray war

By combining these theoretical perspectives, the research provides a comprehensive analysis of how the Ethiopian media was used to construct and sustain the political narrative of the Tigray war.

The study found that state-owned and party-affiliated media promoted government narratives blaming Tigrayans for human rights abuses and denying foreign involvement. Media frames dehumanised Tigrayans, labelling them with derogatory terms, akin to the RTLM's use of 'cockroach' during the Rwandan genocide, such as: 'daytime hyena', 'devil', 'monsters', 'weeds', 'cancer', 'ghosts', 'traitors', 'homosexuals', and the 'enemy'.

It is clear from the findings of this research, that the media portrayed Tigrayans as a threat to Ethiopian unity, justifying the war as a law enforcement operation. The government controlled the narrative through a total communication blackout in Tigray, limiting alternative perspectives. Media incitement contributed to ethnic profiling, killing, arrests, and mob justice against Tigrayans, leading to atrocities and possible war crimes. Contrary to expectations, many media organisations served the government's alliance, using public figures to shape public opinion. Critical local and international media faced closures, jamming, intimidation, and arrests enabled state-affiliated media to dominate the narrative. The study concludes that the Ethiopian media played an inflammatory role in the Tigray war.

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Authors' contributions

S. E. Geb designed the research and provided overall guidance to the study. Daniel Tesfa established the research framework and conducted the interviews. Both authors collected the data, organised the coding and labelling, analysed the data and reviewed all the article versions and contributed suggestions on the conceptual framework. Both authors worked on the subsequent drafts. This work has been carried out as part of the PhD study of Daniel Tesfa.

Ethical considerations

This research was carried out under ethical clearance obtained from Mekelle University, reference number CSSL/RCS/0005/2023.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the 'Note on content and editorial decisions' (Book 1).

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