



# The Political Economy of Mainstream Television Channels in Ethiopia: Perspectives from Ownership and Regulations

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## Abstract

The main objective of this article was to explore the political economy of mainstream TV channels in Ethiopia from the perspective of ownership and regulations. The study used a qualitative approach to document analysis. It also conducted an in-depth interviews with randomly selected media monitoring experts and journalists working in the newsrooms of TV channels to augment the data. The results showed that media ownership and political power are closely intertwined in Ethiopia. It also indicated the private TV channels need reasonable subsidies to survive in an increasing market competition. The boundary between private and government ownership is hazy despite differences in the business models with parallel censorship conditions in both private and government-owned channels. There is diversity in TV ownership, with lower competition and sluggish development of TV infrastructure. Constricted control of TV channels by manifold and overlapping regulatory provisions are obstructing TV content and restraining freedom of the press characterizes the political economy of TV channels. This study suggests a need for the establishment of a system in which constitutional rights and regulatory frameworks would become compatible to protect press freedom and diversity of voices in mainstream TV channels.

**Keywords:** Political Economy, Television Channels, Ownership, Regulations, Press Freedom

## Introduction

The field of the political economy of the media continues to be of central interest to scholars of media and communications studies. Media environment and regulatory frameworks change over time mainly due to shifting political situations. Questions arising from media ownership and organizational structure draw out the profound and ongoing significance of understanding media (Flew, 2011, p. 84). The political-economy approach analyzes the relationships between politics, mediation, and economics (Jin, 2018, pp. 1-2). Political economists have been more concerned with comparisons between ideals and realities (Gandy, 1992). Litschka (2019) notes that while ideals are more concerned with normative values such as responsibilities for the marketplace of ideas, realities are linked with thoughts in the classical economics of objective production values and equilibrium (Litschka, 2019, pp. 81-88). Hence, the political economy of the media relishes the study of these intersections. Production are influenced by power structures imposing borders of regulations on media industries. Studies falling under "political economy of communication" have been

growing and diversifying in the past fifty years (Graham, 2007, p. 2). This article aims at exploring political economy of TV channels from perspectives of ownership and regulatory mechanisms.

### **Understanding Political Economy of the Media**

One of the key fields of study to understand the interplay between politics and media economy is political economy. The political economy of communication is typically seen to be the sole preserve of Marxist scholars (Winseck, 2016). Political economy is a broad field that incorporates traditions of thinking grounded in classical liberal economic thought and thinkers, such as Malthus, Mill, Petty, Ricardo, Say, Smith, and Ure (Fuchs, 2014, p. 2718). In addition, Boner (2018) who authored a book on philosophy and political economy begins with thoughts of Plato and Aristotle, especially on their conceptions of wealth, production and distribution, and civil society describing their influence on natural rights. Earlier, Graham noted that political economy studies how values of all kinds are produced, distributed, exchanged, and consumed (the economic); how power is produced, distributed, exchanged, and exercised (the political); and how these aspects of the social world are related in history (Graham, 2007, pp. 226-227). The expressions 'political economy of the media' and the political economy of communication are used interchangeably.

For instance, Vincent Mosco defines the political economy of communication as the 'study of social relations,' predominantly the power relations that mutually constitute the production and distribution of communication resources (Mosco, 2009). Building on this view, Meyer argued that television in the field of critical studies is largely understood as a product of three distinct yet interrelated parts: text, audience, and production. These are all central to the political economy of the media (Meyer, 2011). Janet Wasko relates this to the moral philosophy of economic systems and policy problems and suggests strategies for resistance and intervention. Accordingly, this was possible using methods drawn from history, economics, sociology, and political science (Wasko, 2005, p. 27). Generally, the political economy of the media lends itself to the examination of the relationship between the structure of control and capitalist society (Mosco, 2009); power relations in the production and consumption of media (Wasko, 2005; 2014); policy and regulation (Hardy, 2014), and press freedom (Huang, 2019). These all-issues form hierarchies of influences on media owners, managers, and journalists at different levels in the news media (Milojević & Krstić, 2018). Building on these perspectives, we critically examined issues related to media laws and regulations, policies, and ownership reforms that have been made on media infrastructure in Ethiopia.

### **Media Ownership**

Media ownership is one of the most important elements of the political economy of the media. The Ethiopian media environment is characterized by a polarization between private and state-owned enterprises (Skjerdal, 2011). Most television stations are owned by the government or indirectly associated with the ruling political party. Skjerdal (2012) holds that there is no public broadcasting in Ethiopia. For Skjerdal, Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) is a national media firm directly controlled by the state and hence, it is difficult to categorize under public service broadcasting.

In Ethiopia, some of the privately owned media are also closely connected to the ruling government. A study on Fana TV, one of the private corporations argue that this nature of ownership can be traced back to their establishment as propaganda machines for rebel groups that have been fighting against monarchies in Ethiopia (Abdissa and Fitih, 2018). Therefore, they have been used as a voice of insurgence and agitation against the existing system. As Fana TV subscribes to the development journalism model, the incumbent regime keeps it under its control and indirectly exerts pressure on private media to embrace (Abdissa and Fitih, 2018, p. 293). Despite political shifts and changes in central power, this system persevered for an extended period, maintaining its continuity even as human leadership underwent transformations.

With changing political situation and shifting power, Fana and Walta TV channels continue to support the ruling party. Currently, many members of the Ethiopian people's revolutionary democratic front (EPRDF) are pulled into parts (some through a coalition into a ruling Prosperity Party). As a result, Ethiopia has been undergoing nationwide reform was supposed to positively influence the media landscape. However, skeptics point out that media outlets continue to operate under difficult policy and economic conditions (Mukundu, 2018). On the other hand, due to the rebuffing of the coalition by the TPLF, the media that were connected to the previous regime immediately turned against the TPLF.

The structure of ownership reflects the financial and legal status of media companies (Guyot, 2009). As forms of ownership determine the nature of media markets, Guyot noted that market forces lead to fierce competition. Market competition among media organizations has attracted interest in the study of political economy since the economics of the media affect audience consumption. Nevertheless, political power characterizes the political economy of the Ethiopian media more than the market forces. This situation exacerbates the economic situation of private and small media houses that are no longer supported by the government as content production in government media are subsidized by the government budgets.

Therefore, the professional integrity of journalists might have been challenged in private media industries. This seems to worsen as government continues to draft additional regulatory mechanisms. Guyot perceives the condition as something beyond traditional political interference, including self-censorship, due to conflicts of interest with economic factors (Guyot, 2009, p. 2). From this perspective, economic factors have become evident in recent developments in print media, radio networks, and television channels. Official censorship and self-censorship have also a significant impact on human development index (Abraham & Amanuel, 2020). At the macroeconomic level, the media environment is generally influenced by the government's policy and legal controls. Nevertheless, there are three different forms of ownership in Ethiopian media: private, government, and community media. Religious media sponsored by 'religious masses' is not yet categorized into any form of ownership. However, in the Ethiopian context, they are simply referred to as religious media.

### **The Legal Landscape**

Despite political transitions and changes in central power, the media landscape in Ethiopia has remained resilient and relatively unchanged. In the 1995 Constitution, there are provisions that aim to uphold principles such as equality, diversity, and democratic rights. These principles are crucial for ensuring the freedom and independence of society. For instance, Articles 5, 25, 27, 29, 35, and 41 of the Ethiopian

constitution establish the ideas of equality and democratic rights, encompassing aspects such as language equality, freedom of information and the press, and the importance of inclusion and diversity. It is worth noting that certain regulations may have influenced media organizations working in specific languages, imposing certain restrictions or requirements.

Similarly, there are media laws ratified from 1991 onwards to rectify the rights enshrined in Article 29. Press Proclamation No. 34/1992; the broadcasting proclamation number 178/1999, the Criminal Code of Ethiopia 2004, the broadcasting service proclamation No. 533/2007, the Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation No. 590/2008; the Charities and Societies Proclamation 621/2009; the Proclamation on Anti-Terrorism 652/2009; Advertisement Proclamation 759/2012; Hate Speech and disinformation proclamation, 1185/2020, the recent state of emergency proclamation number 1/2016 and 3/2020, the fact-checking platform by Ethiopian media authority are entirely used to silence journalists and choke media contents and voices critical of the government.

Despite constitutional provisions safeguarding rights such as equality, freedom of expression, and access to information, media laws and regulations in Ethiopia often impose limitations on these freedoms. The government utilized the 1992 press proclamation to curtail the rights of private media, potentially stifling media diversity and impeding critical voices from shaping public opinion. In 2008, the house of peoples' representatives passed the mass media and freedom of information proclamation, which addressed various aspects such as protecting information sources, the right of reply, prior restraint, and addressing defamation-related moral harm. Nonetheless, the constitution explicitly prohibits censorship and emphasizes the importance of accessing information in the public interest. In response to heightened political polarization, the government introduced the "Hate Speech and Disinformation Protection Proclamation No. 1185/2020," primarily targeting social media (Gizachew, 2022), but it had unintended consequences by creating a chilling effect on the mainstream media landscape. Consequently, media practitioners have faced challenges in fully enjoying the rights guaranteed to them by these legislative measures.

Earlier, human rights organizations, such as amnesty international, criticized the anti-terrorism proclamation of Ethiopia. This was mainly because of its vagueness in defining terrorism and terrorist activities (Abebe, 2016). Currently, political polarization and deadly conflicts are ongoing in the northern part of the country. The situation in the Tigray regional state is described as a manifestation of continued political parallelism (Skjerdal and Mulatu, 2020). Generally, that there have been periods of short-lived media liberalization in Ethiopia. Hence, the 2018 reforms have not gone deeply into providing moderate changes to the laws, and as a result, abuse and acts of violence against journalists persist.

### **Politics and Freedom of Expressions in Ethiopia**

In any country, the state of politics, media, and freedom of expression are closely interlinked. Media plays a key role in enabling citizens to monitor incumbents' actions in voting decisions (Besley, Burgess, & Prat, 2002, p. 1). It is imperative to note that media professionalism can only flourish in an environment of freedom (Mukundu, 2018). In a country where democracy is yet to develop, where officials are very leaning to authoritarianism, professionalism would suffer media influence would diminish. The situation makes the relationship between the media and politics hostile. In his article on paradoxes of inclusion, Ferdman quoted

the idea of social psychologist Peter Salovey, who claims that there are no contradictions between free speech, inclusion, and equality (Ferdman, 2017, p. 235). Although the right to freedom of expression was guaranteed by the constitution of Ethiopian Federal Democratic Republic (EFDR), the political culture of Ethiopia is intolerant of dissent and criticism in public (Timotheos, 2010). Therefore, one could argue that the present-day Ethiopia is categorized as one of the states in which freedom of the press is suppressed due to relatively differing echelons of restrictions across time.

The political history of modern Ethiopia has been replete with narratives of national oppression, inequality, and a lack of political freedom (Abdissa, & Fitih, 2018, p. 292). Accordingly, the period of the monarchial regime and the reign of military dictatorship were often seen as epitomizers of such unattractive narratives. Abbink (2006) argues that post-1991 Ethiopia saw significant political institution building and the public ethos of democracy emerged. Nevertheless, the relationship between the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and media has been contentious and adversarial (Gagliardone, 2014). This controversy emanates from the government's dearth of firmness to maintain its commitment to freedom.

Around 2005, the private media sector showed vibrancy, with unprecedented openness of outlets for opposition political parties (Menychele, 2017). In 2004, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was removed from Reporters without Borders' annual list of "Enemies of the Free Press" for the first time (Levine, 2013). According to Levine, this condition paved the way for opposition parties to get access to the media and televised debates in the 2005 Ethiopian Election. However, this freedom has not persisted for long. Gradually, it was followed by different repressive measures such as closure of different private media and the detention of journalists (Aalen & Tronvoll, 2009, p. 200; Zewge, 2010; Skjerdal, 2012; Dagim, 2013; Nutman, 2013; Levine, 2013; Menychele, 2017; Abdissa & Fitih, 2018). Private newspapers were targeted and closed. Stremlau once noted that the relationship between the government and the private press worsened as the government accused the private press of causing a closure of critical papers (Stremlau, 2012). There has been a relative degree of freedom in broadcast media. The liberalization of the media environment under the new political dispensation did not affect broadcast media until 2007 (Abdissa and Fitih, 2018). Recently, the polarization of politics, stiff conflicts, and civil war have been ongoing in the country. Hence, political reform has been unstable and has not continued at the same temper (Muluken, Mulatu, & Biset, 2021). The administration of Abiy Ahmed has brought another political disintegration between political elites who have fast admitted to the prosperity party and those who have been observed with some sort of doubt.

During the recent years of the Oromo protests, there has been a deterioration in the control of media and communication systems. This deterioration is primarily due to the government's concerns about journalists who aimed to report on the brutal actions of the federal police towards the protesters. The Oromo Protest refers to a series of demonstrations and acts of resistance against the rule of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) that took place from 2014 to 2018 (Tewodros, 2020, p. 5). Habtamu and Eisen explain the actions taken by security forces during protests:

Killings, maiming, detentions, rape, and other crimes against humanity that federal police and local police units named Agazi, and the armies have been committing against unarmed Oromo civilians remain hidden (Habtamu and Eisen, 2016, p. 345).

This displays crimes against humanity and the unalterable repressive actions of government. Social media content also brought nervousness and outrage communication manifested by inflammatory expressions, hate speech, and political extremism (Workneh, 2020, pp. 11-16). This has its own chilling effect on mainstream television's role as a voice to diversified political views. In 2018, the Abiy administration underwent several reforms. For instance, restructuring of ministers and empowerment of women, establishment of a peace ministry, release of political prisoners, and economic reforms (Jima, 2021, 1-18). However, law enforcement was delayed for alleged crimes on humanities as polarity in politics continued. As a result, concerns about freedom of expression and information have increasingly worsened the quandary to allow public debate in the 2020 election (Bratt, 2019/2020). However, the 2020 election was postponed<sup>1</sup> to the year 2021 and government continued its internet blackout in the western and northern regions of the country. As a result, the CPG recommended journalists to be vigilant since they currently can only rely on the "good will" of Abiy and his government (CPJ, 2019), and hence they are not fully protected. These incidents have contributed to the pessimistic views that we have developed regarding the changing environment for press freedom (Endaylalu, 2022). Consequently, new opportunities for democratic transition and consolidation have quickly emerged.

Currently, there is a large body of research on Ethiopian media. However, few studies have been conducted on political economy of the TV industry. Research conducted so far on the Ethiopian media has focused on separate issues of ownership (Nutman, 2013), media and development, political parallelism, press freedom (Mukundu, 2018), media and gender (Agaredech, 2013), media, democracy and election (Dagim, 2013) and journalistic practice and credibility (Abdissa and Fitih, 2018). Separately, these studies could not provide a general picture of the media's political economy. In this article, we specifically focus on the political economy of three mainstream<sup>2</sup> TV channels, while also providing a broader overview of the political and legal playing fields. The three channels incorporated in this study are the ETV news channel, Fana TV channel, and Walta TV channel.

## Research Questions

The main objective of this article was to examine the political economy of the government and private television channels. To attain the objectives, it poses the following research questions:

1. What are the forms of ownership that characterize the mainstream television channels in Ethiopia?
2. In what legal and political environments do the TV channels operate?
3. How the political economy of television channels affects the diversity of voices?

## Materials and Methods

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<sup>1</sup> The schedule of the 2020 Election was postponed to unknown time due to Covid-19 pandemic, and later it was rescheduled to take place on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Mainstream TV channels in the context of this study refers to TV Channels working in large corporations having an influence on potential viewers and reflecting and shaping a prevailing state of socio-economic situation of the country (the media to which news savvy people tune into on the daily bases).

The study was carried out on three prominent television networks, namely ETV, a government-owned news channel, and privately-owned Fana TV and Walta TV channels. It was based on a qualitative research design. It triangulates qualitative document analysis method with an in-depth interviews. During the research process, the investigator may collect qualitative data from various documents (Creswell, 2014). This enables a researcher to obtain the language and words of the participants that can be assessed at a time convenient to the researcher. Official documents such as constitution, broadcasting proclamations, media licensing agreements were consulted. Websites with different media ratings and journalists' salary explorers were also accessed. Articles and reports by international governmental and non-governmental organizations on the nature of the media in Ethiopia were also accessed.

To support the document analysis with an indepth interviews, total of 25 journalists working in the newsrooms of three TV channels selected. The selection of these journalists was purposeful and took into account their years of experience, roles within the newsrooms, and gender. The main selection criterion was their experience as news producers, with a deliberate effort made to ensure gender representation. Specifically, male and female journalists with three to fifteen years of experience, holding various roles such as reporter, producer, and editor, were intentionally chosen. Out of the interviewed journalists, seven were female reporters working in the newsrooms. Furthermore, eight media monitoring and evaluation experts, including two directors from the Ethiopian media authority, were also interviewed. Two of the experts interviewed were females. The interviews took place between March and May 2022, at mutually convenient times for the journalists and media monitoring experts, following thorough reviews of relevant documents. Interview guides containing topical questions about media ownership, regulations, and journalistic practices were utilized. The purpose of conducting these interviews was to complement the data obtained through document analysis, employing a technique known as triangulation. The duration of the interviews varied, ranging from approximately thirty minutes to over an hour, depending on the pace at which each journalist provided the required information.

### **Data Analysis**

The documents underwent a comprehensive and detailed analysis that involved examining the meaning and significance of the text within the context of licensing agreements for different stakeholders, including authorities and media owners. The interview data was analyzed using a reflexive approach, which aimed to improve the reliability and validity of the findings, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2020). Reflexivity, in this context, refers to researchers actively monitoring their actions and processes to ensure the scientific integrity of their practices, as explained by Carreiras and Caetano (2016). In this research project, the authors initially chose six transcribers and introduced them to the text material by providing recorded interviews for them to listen to. Subsequently, the transcribers were instructed to transcribe an audio recording. Ultimately, three transcribers were selected based on their ability to transcribe the recorded audio using a similar language style. These three selected transcribers were then responsible for transcribing the entire set of interview data. The information collected from journalists and media monitoring experts has been compiled into an 80-page document consisting of

written content. This content has been organized into different categories based on themes for further analysis.

Atlas ti.7 was used to analyze the data collected from documents and interviewees thereby thematizing the interview results and creating networks of opinions among media monitors working in the Ethiopian media authority. A prototype ATLAS.ti was developed in 1989 at the Technical University of Berlin (Evers & Silver, 2014, pp. 1-2). Like other computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), ATLAS.ti does not actually analyse data (Friese, 2012). It is simply a tool for supporting qualitative content analysis and provides assistance for a thinking subject, which is the task of intellectual work (Konopásek, 2007, p. 277; Hwang, 2008, p. 524). It extends researchers' mental capabilities to organize, remember, and be systematic. In this study, Atlas ti. was used mainly to show the interdependence, overlapping and sometimes contradicting views of media monitoring experts regarding the licensing issues and regulatory frameworks.

## Results

Significant progress in television infrastructure development has been lacking in Ethiopia. However, between 2016 and 2018, there were notable advancements in television ownership, particularly in the proliferation of private television stations, networks, and religious television channels, which stood out in contrast to government-owned television entities. Presently, there are approximately 13 government-run television stations, including the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), which serves as the national broadcaster. The ETV news channel, operated by the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, is one of the channels that formed the basis of this study. Furthermore, the EBC encompasses four TV channels and two FM radio stations (EBC website, <https://ebc.et/>). The prevailing trend is the ownership of multiple TV channels, radio stations, digital media outlets, and social media pages as a means of expansion and market consolidation. Nevertheless, the concentration of ownership within the mainstream media sector remains relatively insignificant.

Both Fana TV and Walta TV play significant roles in disseminating information and news to the Ethiopian public. Fana TV, in addition to its television presence, operates 11 FM radio stations that are strategically located in various major cities throughout the country. This extensive radio network enables Fana Broadcasting Corporation to reach a diverse and wide geographic area. The FM radio stations serve as important channels for providing social, economic, and cultural content, as well as advertisements. Walta TV, similarly, focuses on broadcasting political, social, and economic issues in multiple languages. Its TV channel, along with its radio stations, ensures a comprehensive coverage of news and information across Ethiopia. The inclusion of languages such as English and Swahili further expands the audience reach and facilitates communication with a broader international audience. Overall, Fana TV and Walta TV, along with their respective radio stations, contribute slightly to the media landscape in Ethiopia. They provide a platform for diverse voices, opinions, and content, reflecting the country's multicultural and multilingual nature.

Walta Media and Communication Corporation expands its horizons with new channels and stations. It has just launched a multi-language channel with international focus, catering to a global audience in English, Arabic, and Swahili. This move aims to diversify the company's outlets and reach a wider range of viewers.



In addition to the new channel, Walta Media has also introduced Walta FM 105.1, an FM station, with the goal of establishing multiple stations in regional areas. The company has already begun transmissions in Harar and Jijiga in 2022, bringing entertaining and informative content to these local communities. With these recent endeavors, Walta Media and Communication Corporation is demonstrating its commitment to expanding its reach and providing quality programming across different languages and regions.

The other twelve stations are regional television organizations, including Addis Television. This station focuses on topical issues of the capital Addis Ababa and transmits in Amharic and Afan Oromo. Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN) broadcasts topical issues of Oromia regional states in Afan Oromo and diverse languages such as Sidama, Somali, English, and Arabic. Amhara Media Corporation (AMC) broadcasts in Amharic, Tigray Television in Tigringa.

Similarly, Harari Television transmits in Harari and Afan Oromo, Somali Regional Television (SRTV) in Somali, Debub Television in Amharic, Dire Television in Amharic, Afan Oromo, and Somali languages. Gambella Television broadcasts in Amharic, Afar Television in Afar, Wolaita Television in Amharic, English, and Wolaita, and Benishangul Media in Benishangul and Amharic. All government TV stations fall under the general news category and strive to transmit using diverse languages of the society.

According to interviews with Fana TV journalists, bid-based project reports and advertisements are the main sources of funds for private TV channels. There is a time when programs are directly funded by organizations whose projects are uncovered by the programs (Personal interview, Fana TV, April 10, 2022). While serving as optional business model for private media, research in Serbia found that the relations among media owners, organizations funding the news media and journalists had adverse effect on the autonomy of media organizations (Milojevic & Krstic, 2018).

This form of funding also complicates the relationship between advertising and news. In addition, both government and private corporations have their respective online presence by which they cop up with increasing competition among media outlets. These efforts to have digital platforms could strengthen the business of TV channels as they could be exposed to more audiences and attract advertising companies. As a result, competition is tough with digital media and online bloggers, as audiences' choice slopes to the online content. In the digital era, smaller media markets are vulnerable to global players and foreign influence (Enli, Raats, Syvertsen, & Donders, 2019). This could negatively affect the relatively small private TV channels striving to survive the competition with government television that is fully subsidized.

In Ethiopia, there is a comparative concentration of ownership. Most of TV channels are controlled by the government mostly in the form of community ownership. Only few channels are owned by private corporations. The size of the Ethiopian broadcasting corporation that runs the ETV news channel is larger than the two private television channels included in this study. Private channels (Fana TV and Walta TV) were also observed to have similarly set themselves as purely pro-government in their production. However, interview with journalists of private TV channels indicates that they are appealing to be subsidized by the government.

*The Economy of Journalists and Condition of their Autonomy*

The economic situation of journalists in Ethiopia is a cause for concern. Their interest in seeking government subsidies for their organizations is directly linked to their declining financial circumstances and the growing competition within the industry. The salary scales for journalists in both government and private TV channels are fairly comparable. However, there has been a recent trend toward increasing salaries for journalists in private TV channels. As a result, media organizations are facing a rising issue of high turnover rates as journalists struggle to cope with the impact of inflation. There is a noticeable inclination among journalists to leave government positions in favor of private media institutions if they are offered additional benefits based on their experience and production skills. This shift has had consequences for program production, and in some cases, it has even led to the suspension of certain programs. The inadequacy of skilled and qualified personnel is a problem that has been described by a news producer at Walta TV.

The current cost of living in Ethiopia is unaffordable. We are unable to sustain ourselves with the salaries and benefits we receive from our organization. As a result, there is a significant issue with turnover among journalists in various media houses. Walta TV is my third institution, and I believe I will start searching for other organizations that offer higher compensation than what I am currently receiving (Personal Interview, Walta TV, March 20, 2022).

Salaries for journalists in TV channels generally tend to be relatively similar, particularly for reporters, although they can vary based on years of experience. However, there are exceptions where certain TV channels offer higher salaries. For instance, Oromia Broadcasting Network provides better compensation compared to EBC (ETV), Fana, and Walta media corporations. According to the 2022 report from Salaryexplore.com, the salary range for reporters falls between 4,480 ETB (lower), 9,740 ETB (average), and 15,500 ETB (higher), with an average monthly salary of 9,740 ETB. This average salary is approximately equivalent to 186.23 USD.

The low salaries in the journalism field have led to the impoverishment of journalists across newsrooms, resulting in a high turnover rate as journalists increasingly seek employment in higher-paying companies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as communication officers and public relations practitioners. This trend has been indicated by interviews conducted with journalists in TV newsrooms. Additionally, limitations in human resources and budget constraints create additional pressure on journalists. These challenges also extend to editors, as exemplified by a statement made by an editor at Walta TV as follows:

There is a significant disparity in salary between the individual's previous position at Prime Media and their current position at Walta Media and Communication Corporation. At Prime Media, the monthly salary was approximately 34,000.00 Ethiopian Birr, whereas at Walta Media and Communication Corporation, the salary has decreased to 23,000.00 Ethiopian Birr. There is a widespread labor exploitation among journalists in certain media institutions (Personal Interview Walta TV news editor, March 20, 2022).

The quotation suggests a challenging issue related to salary disparities among journalists in private media institutions. This discrepancy creates a competitive environment to attract skilled professionals, but it also puts pressure on journalists. As a result, journalists may face financial insecurity, as well as social and job insecurity, primarily due to lower salaries. Additionally, the wide variation in journalists' salaries can hinder solidarity and collective action among them, as argued by Pajnik and Hrženjak (2022). Furthermore, it can

lead to reduced autonomy in their journalistic practices and increased control over what they consider newsworthy.

#### *State of Media Infrastructure in the Post reform Ethiopia*

The Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA) was established as autonomous government organization accountable to the House of People's Representatives. Article, 2(4) of the new Ethiopian media proclamation (No. 1238/2021) grants authority to the organization stating, "*the Ethiopian Media Authority (hereinafter referred to as the "authority")* is hereby established as an autonomous Federal Government Agency having its own legal personality", as an independent body to closely regulate media outlets. It takes the initiative to diversify media infrastructure, certifies media outlets, improve accessibility and accommodation of diversified societies. Interview with the officials in the authority indicates that there have been positive changes in the development of media infrastructure since 2018. However, no significant increase was registered in the number of TV channels to which licenses have been granted in the post-reform periods.

Table 1:Media outlets in the Pre and Post Ethiopian Reform (2018-2022).

S.N		Registration, Recognition, and License issuing		
		Pre-Reform	Post Reform	Total
1	Public Radios	10	0	10
2	Public Terrestrial Television	9	0	9
3	Public Satellite Television	8	0	8
4	Commercial Radio	10	6	16
5	Commercial-Satellite TV	11	20	31
6	Subscription Television	2	0	2
7	Pay Television	1	3	4
8	Community Radio	50	4	54
9	Community Television	0	2	2
10	Private Newspapers & Magazines	398	80	478
11	Online media outlets	0	40	40
12	Foreign (abroad) media (Agent based License)	30 Media Journalists (110)	3 Media and (15 Journalists)	33 Media and (125 Journalists)
	<b>Total</b>	<b>529</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>687</b>

Source: Ethiopian Media Authority, March 2022

As inscribed in Article 4 of the broadcast proclamation, one of the main objectives of its establishment was to "*issue broadcasting licenses; ensure diversity and plurality in the utilization, ownership, production/distribution of broadcasting services*". There are various amenities provided to the media organizations by the authority to ensure diversity, as of the interviews conducted with directors of private and government media monitoring experts in the authority. This gives them the confidence that Ethiopian

media authority significantly contributes to the development of media infrastructure and leads to diversity of ownership.

However, media outlets show no significant increase. Public radio, public satellite television, public terrestrial television,<sup>3</sup> and online media outlets did not show any significant increase during the post-reform period. The system of digital terrestrial television achieves high concord with satellite baseline system (Fazel, et. al, 1995). A significant increase was detected in commercial radio and public satellite televisions. This led to some apparent changes in the diversity of ownership in private and commercial media outlets. There has also been a negligible increase in the number of pay television, community radio, and overseas media licensed through agents working in the country. Apart from these, a significant increase in the number of media outlets was demonstrated in private newspapers and magazines in an increase from to 390-478, with 80 additional print media outlets launched during the post reform period. Strict laws and state of emergency proclamations have had potential adverse and constructive effects on the development of media infrastructure, press freedom, and journalistic professionalism.

#### *License Agreements with Ethiopian Media Authority*

Free TV is vital to the development of cultural democracy. The struggle for more TV licenses can be considered as struggle for autonomy (Leung, 2015, pp. 422-423). The Ethiopian media authority has compulsory guidelines indicating conditions to be satisfied by media organizations to get licensed. The sample license document indicated that government satellite television is transmitted with 18127.370 MHz encoding and 10727.370 MHz decoding frequencies. The geographic area coverage indicated in the document covers Ethiopia and Eastern, North-Eastern, and Middle Eastern countries. The wider the agreed area of coverage, the more the TV channels accommodate people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

With respect to production of programs, the licensee shall devote at least 60% of its programs to Ethiopian national issues, Article 9(a); it shall be designed to make understanding of the constitution of Ethiopia to the people, 9(b). Women, elders, children, youths, disabilities, and street dwellers ought to be given special consideration by programs 9(c). Like government satellite television, 60% of private televisions' programs shall be devoted to national political, social, and economic issues, Article 5(1), legal and constitutional responsibility for nation building, development of democratic ethics, equal representations of nations and nationalities with colorful language, culture, and music.

Finally, it directs the licensee to transmit programs according to the broadcast proclamations endorsed in the country. However, there is no statement that refers to the licensee about what follows if media outlets fail to abide by consent. The monitoring directors claim that the authority would not accept programs whose contents are transmitted without due contemplation of its transmission proposal, license agreement, or

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<sup>3</sup> Terrestrial television or over-the-air television (OTA) is Television broadcasting in which the signal transmission occurs via radio waves ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)).

Also read Liang, W., Zhang, W., He, D., Guan, Y., Wang, Y., & Sun, J. (2007). Digital terrestrial television broadcasting in China. *IEEE Multimedia*, 14(3), 92-97.

regulations. Hence, punishment for violations of the regulations may vary from giving a warning letter to repudiating its license.

Likewise, the objective of licensing agreement between commercial satellite televisions and the Ethiopian Media Authority's was indicated as to ensure that commercial television(s) in Ethiopia operate as per the constitution and broadcast proclamation. The articles on the license agreements are enacted to strengthen the broadcast proclamation and to safeguard the rights to broadcast for private channels like government satellite television. Commercial satellite televisions with a bandwidth of 3 MHz are required to transmit their programs in Ethiopia and other parts of the world. Providing the bandwidths with requirements of the programs produced not only indicates the role of the state in regulations, but also the interplay between the vitality of the bandwidth and plurality of contents as business models. Of course, this is a point at which the Ethiopian, media authority's role in providing the channels with facilities and choices for audiences through requiring them to diversifying their programs becomes clear.

Despite similarities in the responsibilities required from both government and private/ commercial television channels, the commercial TV channels were required to pay 75,550 Ethiopian Birr during the validation of the agreement with annual payments of which the amount was unspecified. The conditions of advertisement content for both commercial and government television are in accordance with advertisement proclamation No. 759/2004. The criteria to be satisfied for granting licenses to government and commercial satellite televisions on national issues are similar. Some additional statements constitute substantial controls for commercial ones. Nevertheless, the bindings in the license agreements are not much different from regulatory proclamations, making the license agreement a double burden to the proprietors.

#### *Ethiopian Media Authority and State of press freedom in the TV channels*

Article 6(5) of the Ethiopian Media Proclamation asserts that the EMA regulates broadcast media to ensure that they are operating in accordance with the constitution. Ethiopia's constitution endows freedom of expression 'without any interference'. The freedom of the press, including freedom of artistic expression is provided in Article 29. Despite this fact, the condition in which EMA interferes with constitutional rights to bridge the gaps was not clearly indicated in the media proclamations. This dearth of vibrant understanding on how to protect the media institutions from unsolicited government meddling has been reflected in the interviews conducted with EMA directors. One of the indicators of the authority's susceptible autonomy is linked to its governance by board members from officials associated with the ruling party. In a nation where leaders are more powerful than institutions, any balance of service by the authorities to media organizations working in a diversified society becomes slightly blurring. For instance, Article 6 (22) of Proclamation No. 1238/2021 indicates that the authority develops standards for broadcasting services and ensures that the standards are met.

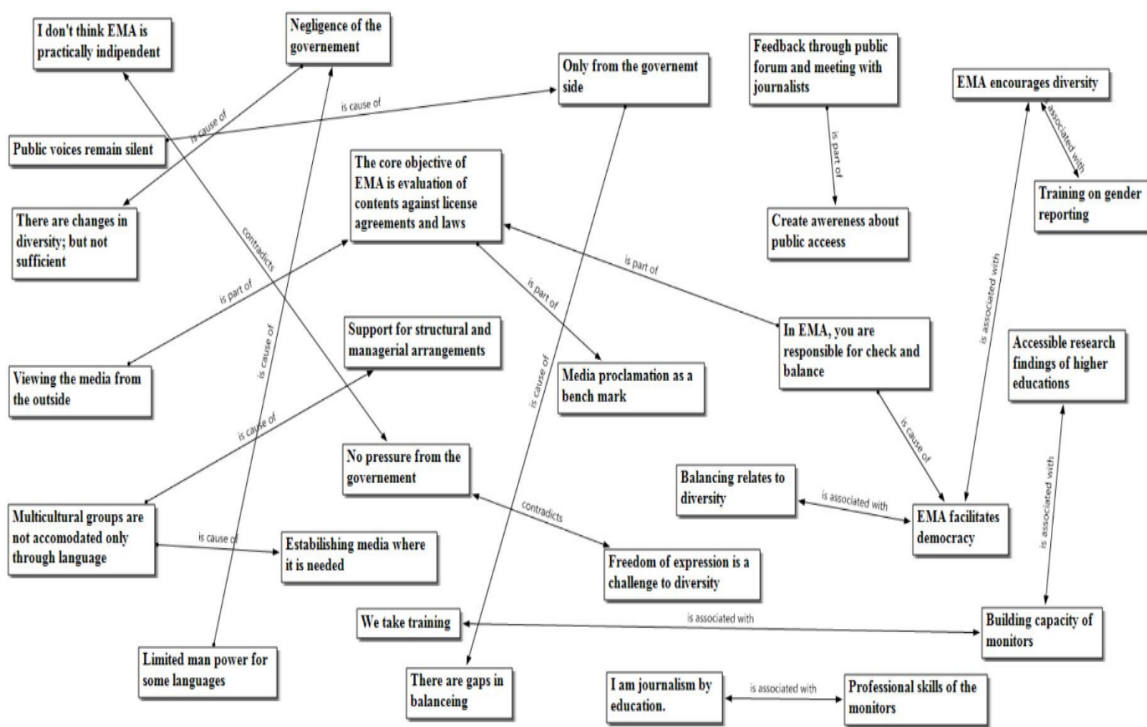
Similarly, the document clearly states that media institutions assume responsibility for satisfying the public as they use public airwaves and economic means by which transmission goes. The interview with members of the media monitors and directors in Ethiopian media authority indicates muddles and paradoxes on the role of the authority in supporting TV channels:

The role of the authority is to facilitate media institutions to operate in the country based

on the license agreements, proposals submitted to the authority, and monitoring their productions against the agreements and proclamations for issues related to the language of transmission, representations of cultural groups, and coverage of geographic areas (Personal interview, EMA, April 10, 2022).

Accordingly, the authority facilitates media institutions and checks whether they operate according to regulatory frameworks. Paradoxically, the interviewees also indicate that the authority faced challenges in harmonizing the interests of media organizations and the government that wishes to control media discourses for political gains. This has set the journalists in doldrums of self-censorship. Hence, the article in media proclamation which defines the EMA as an autonomous authority to set standards, laws, and policies would become certainly implausible. The systems in which authority, media institutions, and government interact could be inferred from figure below as intersections of semi-harmonious views among media monitoring experts in the Ethiopian broadcasting authority.

Figure 1: Statements Describing Opinions among Media Monitors in Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA)



Source: Authors' created by the authors from the data

Media monitoring experts were certain about the core objectives of the media authority and the role it plays in regulating media practices: facilitating public access to the media, providing capacity building for practitioners and monitors, and maintaining the diversity of contents and languages. Consequently, they believed TV channels would represent multicultural groups. The monitoring experts are observers who critically view media productions from the outside and are impartial to groups of interests.

The experts also refer to some obstructions to their efforts, mainly from the government. For instance, it has been indicated that the Ethiopian media authority's (EMA) responsibility is to maintain checks and

balances to ensure equal representations for various groups. As balancing implies representations of corresponding voices, there are reproachful discourses of media monitors blaming the government for controlling media. Overrepresentations of government voices silence public voices. As a result, the binding rules and standards indicated in the proclamations are rarely implemented mainly due to government interruptions and interest in exploitative use of airtimes, obscuring the autonomy of the authority in operating in accordance with proclamations.

Moreover, there are confusions and contradictions between the monitors viewpoints. While they are asked whether multicultural groups get equal representations in the content of both private and government TV channels, they speak on the principles instead of giving straightforward reactions. For instance, there were reflections implying that EMA would not clearly evaluate the contents, or that the authority has no clearly specified indicators of diversity in the news and programs transmitted by television channels.

We know that diversity could not be accommodated only through language of transmission, or by giving coverage to some geographic area; rather, it is about beliefs, culture, and attitude towards others; it is very important to establish media institutions for some communities to obtain media representations (Personal interview, EMA, April 3, 2022).

Ethiopian media authority lacks autonomy and an efficient mechanism to control the contents produced by TV channels. This leads to catastrophe in its intervention TV production systems. In this manner, the authority's ability to influence the deeply ingrained perceptions of program producers regarding the level of diversity in their program content will be insufficient to counteract the established power structure. The main language for monitoring the programs is Amharic. They also managed to monitor the programs transmitted in Afan Oromo and Tigrigna. However, they are yet to begin monitoring programs produced in other languages such as Wolaita and Sidama. Therefore, we can infer from the monitoring experts' explanation, a limitation in the diversity of languages could have an adverse effect on monitoring practices. This implies that diversity suffers, even in the organization that are established to maintain balance. As a remedy, monitoring experts suggest capacity-building trainings, especially on language skills.

Furthermore, despite some experts arguing that the government does not exert restrictive pressure, there is a prevailing perspective that freedom of expression poses challenges to the diversity and plurality of content within media organizations. Interviews have revealed instances of censorship in both government and private television channels. These findings indicate a concerning state of press freedom characterized by extensive control over media practices. Additionally, while some experts argue that there is no oppressive pressure from the government, there is still a perspective that freedom of expression poses challenges to the diversity and plurality of content in media institutions. Interviews have revealed instances of censorship in both government and private TV channels. This indicates a troubling state of press freedom, characterized by extensive control over media practices. Such control is often justified by the need to maintain social harmony, leading to self-censorship among journalists who fear making editorial decisions that may be deemed problematic in terms of headlines, news angles, language, and visuals (personal interview; Walta TV, March 20, 2022).

As the government needs homogeneity of voices to ensure unity of society, it puts pressure on journalists working to bring diverse voices to the newsrooms. This could be supported by the idea of Robert Picard,

who holds the view that media systems, their content, the degree of freedom of expression, and the press are reflections of dominant cultural elements in society (Picard, 2014, p. 97). In addition, Reporters Without Borders<sup>4</sup> indicated that Ethiopian media remained very polarized and continued to be characterized by opinion journalism to the detriment of reporting and fact-checking. However, it was more open and pluralistic than under the previous government (Reporter Without Boarder (RWB, 2022). In a present time, the condition of press freedom in private and government mainstream and online media is severe.

Since the start of the war in Tigray in November 2020, conflicts and civil wars among different factions led to increased abuse against journalists. This has made it extremely difficult for journalists to access information. Consequently, Ethiopia was ranked 114<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries in the 2022 World Press Freedom Index. According to data from Reporters Without Borders (RWB), one journalist was killed on January 1, 2022, and 12 journalists were reported to be in prison. According to an article written by Henry Wilkins, a producer at the Voice of America (VOA), published on May 4, 2022, the state of press freedom in Ethiopia has reached a crucial juncture, largely because of the ongoing conflict between the federal government and the Tigray region. These circumstances indicate that the government has not effectively implemented regulatory measures in accordance with established regulations while safeguarding journalists' freedoms.

## Discussion

The strong correlation between media ownership and political influence in Ethiopia has had a profound effect on the way the media operates within the country's political and economic spheres. The media landscape has undergone notable transformations due to recent shifts in political leadership and advancements in digital technology. This has resulted in a swift growth of the television industry, characterized by the licensing of channels across three distinct ownership categories: government-owned, privately-owned, and community-based media. There is a growing trend towards reliance on digital and online platforms, which Seipp (2023) suggests is reshaping the power dynamics in terms of opinion, news production, and distribution. This transition presents a different market and means of exerting influence, providing a respite from the hierarchical authority that frequently imposes restrictions on the programming of conventional television channels. Although the Ethiopian television industry has not completely embraced this shift, there are signs that both government-run and privately-owned TV channels are progressively adopting online platforms and expanding the range of their contents. According to Kristensen and Hartley (2023), digital and social media platforms that distribute identical content as mainstream TV channels can be characterized as multi-sided markets that operate concurrently. This can assist companies in growing their market share and mitigating the impact of polarizing and opinionated online content.

In Ethiopia, an intriguing trend has emerged where unlicensed religious television channels are thriving despite efforts by the Ethiopian Media Authority to regulate them. These channels have successfully dominated the industry by utilizing crowdfunding as a means of acquiring capital. By collecting non-

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Reporters Without Borders (RWB) is an international non-profit organization governed by principles of democratic governance. It has more than 134 correspondents around the world. <https://rsf.org/en>, September 2022.



refundable donations from their followers, similar to startup ventures (Carrabs, 2021), these channels secure funding. What makes them unique is their approach of collecting wages from believers, allowing them to offer services and maintain their presence in the market. The absence of licensing agreements for religious leaders suggests either their freedom from regulatory controls or a belief that their content is not harmful. The capital city typically houses most of the government and private television channels, while regional cities are home to community media. The primary aim of launching TV channels that represent regional states was to cater to the diverse ethnic groups residing in those areas. This trend of ownership has been criticized by Mulatu and Terje, who argue that it leads to the ethnicization of the media, thereby having a negative impact (Mulatu & Terje, 2020). Critics of capitalism, such as Knoche (2021, pp. 372-74), employ an analysis of ownership concentration as a means to scrutinize the system. From Knoche's perspective, we can argue that Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), under which ETV is operating, aims to strengthen its business and increase its market options by expanding its ownership to encompass various media outlets, radio stations, and transmitters across the country. This horizontal expansion can be viewed as a strategic move by EBC to enhance its economic power. Private media organizations, inspired by the experience of EBC, are also establishing multiple media outlets in order to bolster their own economic influence.

In addition, Vargo and Amazeen (2021) noted that government TV channels receive financial support from the allocated budget, while private TV channels must find alternative sources of funding. This difference in funding often leads to the production of sponsored news stories in private channels, where the content is influenced by the organizations funding the media. This creates economic arrangements where the composition of journalistic content is shaped by the interests of advertisers (Vargo and Amazeen, 2021, p. 5186). Thus, state funding and public broadcasting play a crucial role in stabilizing the media market, but they can also be manipulative if not properly regulated.

Additionally, Melojevic and Krstic (2018) discovered in their research conducted in Serbia that the state budget and public companies manipulate the market, thereby generating favorable conditions for the establishment of clientelist networks. Journalists employed by private television channels in Ethiopia also encounter lower salaries and a lack of incentives compared to those working in government-owned media. The call for government subsidies aims to address this imbalance and enhance production outcomes. However, it is important to acknowledge that certain journalists in private TV channels may receive higher remuneration based on their qualifications and experience. This situation can create a feeling of disillusionment among journalists, but it can also foster mutually beneficial relationships between journalists, organizations, and politicians. In the study conducted by Melojevic and Krstic, it was found that Serbian journalists have an obligation to disclose the activities of their financial supporters. Without adequate monitoring and regulation, a comparable situation might arise for Ethiopian journalists working in private TV channels.

The presence of multiple regulatory frameworks in Ethiopia creates a significant challenge for TV channels in the country's political economy. In addition to adhering to the constitution and press proclamations, TV channels are also required to obtain licenses from the Ethiopian media authority. The overlapping regulatory frameworks in Ethiopia create complexity and confusion regarding the power of the Ethiopian media authority. It is tasked with promoting competition among media organizations while also fulfilling specific responsibilities. This situation can be interpreted as a means of exercising control over content and potentially limiting the diversity of media content available. Nieminen (2016) supports this perspective by

regarding licensing as a mechanism for controlling the financial and technical capabilities of media institutions. Therefore, from a political economy standpoint, it can be argued that authorities not only seek to determine what is considered newsworthy but also aim to exert control over the business and marketing systems of the media.

The Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA) failed to reconcile regulatory assertions with constitutional rights, leading to an abundance of stringent laws and regulations in the media industry. This forces news media to resort to self-regulation, as argued by Duncan (2014). However, concerns arise due to the close affiliation between the EMA and the government, as well as the lack of defined procedures for applying regulatory frameworks, which raise doubts about the EMA's autonomy and its ability to strike a balance between regulations and public rights. Consequently, ensuring public access to reliable and timely news information by aligning regulatory assertions with constitutional rights remains a contentious issue.

In addition, there is a need for regulatory laws that address the digital presence of media channels and create a balance between content on digital and mainstream platforms. Research by Enli and colleagues (2019) suggests that the government lacks the bureaucratic capacity to effectively respond to the media in the digital era. The emergence of mainstream channels operating both online and offline has further complicated regulatory policies. While digital outlets offer new business opportunities for private channels, they have not been adequately considered within the existing regulatory frameworks. This situation could potentially lead to increased censorship of journalists, thereby negatively impacting mainstream TV channels.

## **Conclusion**

This article examined the political economy of television channels in Ethiopia, focusing on ownership, regulations, and press freedom. It analyzed how political economy factors, particularly media regulations, complicate conditions of press freedom and accommodation of diversity in unstable political situations. The study suggests that most TV channels in Ethiopia directly or indirectly operate under government control through license agreements and specific conditions outlined in their respective license documents. This situation has the potential to blur the distinction between private and government-owned media in Ethiopia. In terms of the media market, it can be challenging for private media organizations to thrive when government TV channels receive financial support from the government, creating an uneven playing field. To ensure equal representation of diverse voices in both private and government TV channels, there may be a need for some form of financial assistance or subsidy for private media outlets. However, it is worth noting that the concentration of ownership and competition between government and private TV channels is relatively lower compared to the competition faced by online media outlets. This poses difficulties for the government and the Ethiopian media authority in regulating the content disseminated online, as it may fall outside the purview of existing regulations and proclamations.

In addition, the development of media infrastructure is sluggish, contrary to promises for opening room to flourishing media institutions following Abiy Ahmed's reign. Hence, the present state of press freedom is suffering intense regulation despite the shaky political reform since 2018. This led to the imprisonment of journalists across different media houses. Even though constitutional rights are provided to safeguard

freedom of information and the press with professional responsibilities, substantial government regulations are also imposing pressure on the editorial policy of television channels.

Generally, overlapping regulatory frameworks from constitutions and proclamations guiding Ethiopian media authority makes the degree of control worrisome. In contexts where leaders in Ethiopia wield considerable power, EMA's intervention in media services, including the facilitation of media infrastructure and ownership, can have significant normative implications. While an active role by authority in supporting the development of a competitive and healthy media industry may be seen as positive, the presence of overlapping regulatory frameworks and the reliance on constitutional references in license agreements can erode media independence. This erosion, in turn, undermines the crucial role of the media as a watchdog, leads to the prevalence of self-censorship, and facilitates the suppression of dissenting voices.

Therefore, to foster a political economy environment that promotes competition among television channels, it is crucial to create space for free journalistic practices. This allows practitioners to exercise their conscience in constructing news stories that serve the public interest. However, it is important to note that simply increasing the number of broadcasting channels in Ethiopia is not sufficient to ensure the establishment of a democratic society.

Press freedom remains uncertain, and it is essential to conduct extensive research on digital media content, government regulations, and their impact on mainstream media. Such research can inform policy actions aimed at shaping digital platforms and promoting a media landscape that upholds press freedom and democratic values.

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