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The Internet's Democratization Effect in Authoritarianisms with Adjectives

The case of Ethiopian participatory media

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Abstract: Pronouncements of the internet's potency as a tool of democratizing authoritarian states are hardly unfamiliar. In this study, I explore the veracity of such claims in Ethiopia, which is ruled by a regime that displays most of the characteristics of authoritarianism, but is often labeled as semi-authoritarianism, electoral dictatorship and competitive authoritarianism. Using a maximalist conception of democracy, the study examined the impact of the country's participatory media in expanding democratic spaces in Ethiopia. My finding suggests that while the Ethiopian government has increasingly become adept at monitoring and surveillance of the internet, the participatory media have improved the intake basin, accessibility, the capacity of filtering for political relevance and accreditation as well as synthesis of the public sphere.

Key words: participation, Ethiopia, participatory platforms, democracy, internet

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1. Introduction

The proliferation-or survival- of many authoritarian political regimes in the world long after the utopian predictions that Internet diffusion would precipitate democratization and the rapid demise of dictators poses serious challenges for students of media and democracy. One of these challenges is that the much anticipated "dictator's dilemma" (Kedzie, 1998) has so far remained just an ebullient, but largely unrealized, hypothesis. Indeed, as the theory suggests, many dictators are cognizant of the economic benefits of connectivity. In modern, increasingly complex societies with high-threshold for satisfaction, autocrats can't last long without having a semblance of either persuasion-induced or contractarian legitimacy (Kampfner, 2010). Many modern successful autocracies gain these forms of legitimacy by delivering rapid economic growth, and for that reason, they have shown a remarkable degree of unwillingness to forego the benefits of the Internet (Benkler, 2006: 267). But they have also learnt how to negotiate connectivity with authoritarian governance and control in much smoother ways than prophesied. This has produced an apparent paradox that more freedom amounts to more control.

As it is often the case, the over-optimism of the early days is slowly making way to rather gloomy views about the Internet's democratizing potential in authoritarian countries. A myriad of literature by frustrated academics – some of whom were early-day enthusiasts – have begun to poke holes into the theories advanced during the 1990s and the first half of the last decade. In their much-flagged skeptical book *Open Network, Closed Regimes* Shanti Kalathi and Tyler Boas(2003) argued that the connection between the rising power of the microchip and the collapse of authoritarian governments had "taken on a powerful, implicit veracity, even when it has not been explicitly detailed"(2003: 1). Seven years after the publication of the book, this conventional, hypodermic-needle proposition has lost some of its luster, and the burden of proving the link between connectivity and democracy in authoritarian countries has increasingly fallen on those who make the claim.

This paper argues that while the emerging skepticism is wise, it would be wrong to wholly reject some of the central arguments of this claim. It is proposed that in a modern authoritarian state where there are limited spaces of public participation, the Internet increases democratization without threatening regime survival in the short term. Exploration of the characteristics and dynamics of the Ethiopian participatory media ecosystem is made to test this proposition. I develop two ground claims, beginning with identifying the problems of the literature on the Internet and democracy in authoritarian countries and ending with an account of the democratic spaces of both dialogic and instrumental participation in modern authoritarian states.

The opening claim is related to the recent literature on the subject: while some of the academic works are complex, carefully constructed and nuanced, the most influential and popular literature suffers from three basic flaws.

(I) At the core of some of these empirical and normative theories of the internet and democratization in authoritarian countries is what may be called a linear effect assumption; a proposition that the internet is an absolute mobility multiplier. I argue that this assumption is too deterministic. Democratization is a function of many variables-social, economic and cultural - and making a linear linkage between communications technology and the expansion of democracy in any society misses the point. In a very sophisticated work, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* (1999), Lawrence Lessing moves away from the deterministic approach without occupying the other side of the spectrum. His framework is nicely articulated by Yochai Benkler. "Different technologies make different kinds of human action and interaction easier or harder to perform. All other things being equal, things that are easier to do are more likely to be done, and things that are harder to do are less likely to be done" (Benkler, 2006:17). This is the approach taken here.

(II) Some of the most popular debates on the internet and democratization in authoritarian countries haven't fully engaged with the range of democratic theory. The Schumpeterian-aggregative democracy (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004) bias in these works is palpable. This is not without reason. A bulk of the debate on internet law and policy is played out in the mass media, halls of parliaments and meeting rooms of civil society organizations. In these settings, simplified catch-sentences like, *"No dictator has so far lost power because of the internet*!" create powerful winning soundbites. Adopting a dichotomous minimalist view of democracy provides a conceptual grounding for such soundbites. There is, however, a far more substantive and sensible scientific reason for the bias. In contrast to the alternative but very contentious maximalist conceptions of democracy, using lower-threshold criteria is a useful instrument for students of democratization in determining the democratic status of a given country (Starr, 2008:40-42). I find this position intuitively appealing. Yet I am also skeptical about whether the difficulties of measurement should prohibitively constrain, and even further disrupt, the conceptual project. More troubling still, this approach leads us to a fatalistic discounting of the inherent characteristic of the internet. As a many-to-many medium, the internet is a platform best suited for participation and its democratization effect is best measured in light of this fundamental aspect. Following David Collier and Robert Adcock (1999), the choice of concept in this research depends on the reason the question was posed in the first place, which inevitably leads to an exploration beyond the Schumpeterian approach and evaluation of the internet's democratization effect in authoritarian countries based on the participatory theories of democracy.

(III) Most studies typically evaluate the internet's democratization effect based on what Cass Sunstein termed a "realistic ideal."[1] They begin with an operationizable conception of democracy, develop indicators and measure the effect of democracy

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[1] See Sunstein/Benkler debate: http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/our_world_digitized.html, 10-04-2008.

based on those indicators. This approach works in purely academic discussion, but most studies of the internet and democracy juxtapose theory and policy. The one relevant policy question that is often neglected in assessing the internet's democratization effect is historical: "compared to what?" This historical comparison between the internet and other mediums of communication – particularly, the mass media- is a constant backdrop to the evaluative analysis made in this paper.

The second claim is related to the rise of new forms of authoritarian regimes. Steven Levitsky and David Collier (1997) famously used "democracy with adjectives" to represent the many subtypes of democracy in academic literature – some of them by no means democratic. Following the same trend, a number of adjectives have been employed by different scholars in forming subtypes of authoritarianism. I call these regimes "authoritarianisms with adjectives." These regimes come in many varieties, but they also exhibit important similarities. They are neither undertaking transitions to democracy, nor in states of weakened forms of democracy. Most of them permit the regular holding of elections; the elections, however, either take place in a situation that the ruling group has major incumbency advantages which negate the essential contents of free, fair and open election, or are manifestly affected by fraud and post-election ballot shenanigans favoring those in power. Fundamental political rights are enshrined in constitutions or other basic legal documents, but serious practical constraints are placed upon them. Frequent and passionate appeal to the rule of law is made by the ruling elite. Yet it is usually invoked to harass, threaten and imprison political competitors, journalists and independent civil society leaders. Formal democratic rules and institutions are created, but they are flagrantly manipulated to weaken opposition and maintain power hegemony. Such trappings of the 'democracy gimmick' are even attracting full-scale authoritarian regimes.

From the perspectives of the theories of the internet and democratization, however, these forms of authoritarianisms generate reasons for hope. These regimes may openly flout democratic principles but, owing to many reasons, are unable or unwilling to do away with them completely (Levistsky and Lucan, 2002:51-55). Unlike in full-scale authoritarian states, there are spaces of political participation – in some cases even deliberation-for citizens. This paper identifies three participatory spaces in these authoritarian states: selectorate spaces, permitted spaces//tolerated spaces and underground spaces. I argue that in authoritarianisms with adjectives, the internet- due to its architecture and economics- increases the democratization of these spaces.

Taken together, these claims link the internet and democratization in authoritarian countries, but in a less linear way than argued by the early enthusiasts. But here a cautionary pause is in order. First, democratization in authoritarian states shouldn't be an open-ended process. As philosopher Joshua Cohen stated "the fundamental idea of democratic legitimacy is that the authorization to exercise state power must arise from the collective decisions of members of a society who are governed by that power" (Cohen, 1989:17). We can only declare victory and go home when the

gradation shows a completed democratic transition within a reasonable period of time; *continuum* in a graded conception of democracy does not mean that there is no critical point to pass. Second, since the broad claim is tested on just one modern authoritarian country, it is to be taken as suggestive at best. More empirical inquiry is needed to test the validity of most of the theoretical claims in this paper.

2. Democratic theory meets the Internet

> In almost all countries run by authoritarian regimes there is an untapped mass of activists, dissidents, and anti-government intellectuals who have barely heard of Facebook. Reaching out to these offline but effective networks will yield more value than trying to badger bloggers to take up political activities. Western embassies working on the ground in authoritarian states often excel at identifying and empowering such networks and new media literacy should become part of diplomatic training. After all, these old-school types are the people who brought democracy to Central and Eastern Europe. And it will probably be them who win freedom for China and Iran too. (Morzov, 2009)

One of the most striking phenomena of the past twenty years is the radical and deeply structural transformation of information production and distribution (Benkler, 2006:1-3). This new structure-largely associated with the internet-is highly decentralized, if not personalized, and has vastly dispersed points of control. This makes it less amenable to command and control than its predecessors. And never before in history has an information production and distribution structure diffused so rapidly (Coleman and Blumler, 2009). It is this architecture and the speed of diffusion of the internet which excites not only traditional democracy theorists, but also policy makers in the West who believe that the internet can help democratize authoritarian regimes.

If you search the net itself to look for materials on the internet's effect on authoritarianisms, you will find vivid evidence of this celebration. Indeed, even the US State Department caught this enthusiasm briefly during the Iranian post-election protests of 2009, asking Twitter to change its maintenance schedule in order to grant protestors uninterrupted usage of the social network site.[2] Leaving the hyperbole and euphoria aside, the claims about the democratization effects of the internet in authoritarian countries can be characterized as variants of five basic claims:

(I)   *Domino Effect.* One of the most cited arguments by techno-enthusiasts heavily draws upon the Cold War domino-effect doctrine, largely associated with US foreign policy in Southeast

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[2] See M. Lee, *State Department Spoke To Twitter About keeping Iran Online*, Huffington Post: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/16/state-dept-spoke-to-twitt_n_216414.html, accessed 06-01-2010

Asia and Central America. The basic premise of this theory is simple: a small change causes a change next to it, which then triggers another change, causing a linear-sequence reaction – like a row of falling dominos. The version of this idea within the internet and democratization literature goes like this: wired citizens in authoritarian states do not just receive economic benefits, but will also learn about more democratic states and aspire for change (Best and wade, 2009:255-56). To use the famed words of Dwight D. Eisenhower, "you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences."[3]

(II) *Fragmentation Effect.* The fragmentation thesis is made most famous by American legal philosopher Cass Sunstein (2002). But while Sunstein uses it as a critique of the internet's democratization effect, some scholars have turned it on its head. It is argued that authoritarians rule through an invincibility factor, persuading or forcing people to believe that there is no other alternative or competing political force. As such, authoritarian governments have to fashion an appearance of overwhelming public support. They rely on propaganda through a tightly controlled mass media to do that. The internet's distributed network architecture fragments this seemingly unified public opinion and withdraws the facade of public support from the authoritarian rulers which, in turn, causes the erosion of invincibility factor (Melkamu, 2005).

(III) *Participatory Enclaves Effect.* Another point of criticism raised by Sunstein is that the internet's deliberative enclaves cause polarization across groups and extremism within them. Yet as Sunstein himself admits, not all polarizations and extremisms are bad (Sunstein, 2009: 149-59). The works of philosopher Jenny Mansbridge(1996) and legal scholar Heather Gerken(2005) temper the conventional and often reflexive anti-extremism and polarization views. In particular, in authoritarian states, extremist deliberative enclaves and echo-chambers have in different times served as spaces where group of like-minded people discuss and amplify the injustices of the state, support each other, feel confident about their claims. The words of Barry Goldwater beautifully capture the essence of this form of extremism: "extremism in defense of liberty is no vice."

(IV) *Cascade Effect.* Social scientists have long identified the phenomenon of informational cascade. It is a process whereby opinions and beliefs disseminate from people to people, "to a point

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[3] See President Eisenhower News Conference:
http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/ps11.htm, accessed 10-12-2009

where many people are relying, not on what they actually know, but on what (they think) other people think."(Morozov, 2009). In democratization literature, cascade effect is mainly identified with people joining a political protest because others are protesting even when the probability of the protest succeeding at the outset is low, thus, increasing the chance of success. In his popular book, *Here Comes Everybody* (2008), Clay Shirky argued that the internet has an effect of magnifying protestational cascades.

(V)   *Transient Society Effect.* A point made primarily by economists who claim that the new internet-enabled information economy demands a highly mobile and educated workforce. Authoritarian states that do not want to miss out on the informational economy produce this work force by incentivizing policy measures, or sometimes even using the coercive instruments of the state. This work force, the argument goes, is more conscious of freedom and democracy and more difficult to control than the factory workers of the Industrial Era(Webster, 2002). According to this view, the structure of the internet-enabled information economy isn't politically neutral. It is pro-democracy.

It is common today to think that most of these arguments are exceedingly, if not naively, optimistic. Not surprisingly, they have elicited several critical responses. The subtler critiques come in four main forms:

(I)   *Internet and power* The most systematic of the responses are offered by critics who advance the theory that the internet is a politically neutral constant. In their view, the internet is just a "set of connections between computers"(Kalathil and Boas, 2003). The infrastructure's political effect is determined by the identity of its users, and the distribution of the internet cannot be unlinked to economic power. It is true, these critics admit, that in authoritarian countries the internet is a more accessible tool of communication than the old media, and there is no escaping the fact that vertical increase of the power of people from a very low base is highly likely. In authoritarian states where power is a zero-sum game, an increase in the power of the people is matched by a similar decrease in the power of the ruling elite. Yet because the ruling elite use the internet more, they can slow down this bleeding of power on their part: the decrease in their vertical power cannot be nearly as threatening to their hold on political power as optimist accounts assert. As such, the political effect of the internet can be determined by looking at the power balance in the society before the adoption of the internet. The wider the gulf, the less the prospect for democratization. The most radical of

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these critics even go as far as claiming that the internet deeply entrenches the power of the ruling elite.

(II) *Value Free* This argument starts with the same assumption as (I): the internet as a politically neutral information infrastructure. In authoritarian societies, an internet-triggered opening up of political spaces doesn't necessarily only empower people with pro-democracy views. Anti-democratic groups – not necessarily allied to the ruling elite- may emerge as the most potent political force through exploitation of the internet (Morozov,2009). Even in case that the internet causes the end of a single authoritarian rule, there is no guarantee that it is not to be replaced by another group of the same inclination.

(III) *Fragmentation* The concern with fragmentation here is in direct tension with the view that fragmented political spaces corrode the invincibility factor of authoritarian rulers. In fact, this view suggests authoritarians stay in power not because they are objectively strong, but because they are strong in comparison to the power of alternative forces. Social scientists call this "relative power"(Dunbar, 2003) In this context, removing them requires cooperation among various opposition forces. A fragmented participatory space complicates attempts at working together.

(IV) *Non-political users* Based on recent studies about internet usage in authoritarian countries, some scholars argue that the internet is full of "de-politicizing distracting noises" such as pornography, sports and entertainment. The assumption that more access to information means increased political awareness is seriously questioned by these critics. It isn't necessarily the nature of medium-as Neil Postman's indictment of television in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) suggests- but people's reticence to seek out political information coupled with the ubiquity of content that makes the internet less political than the conventional argument adumbrates. The stronger version of this claim makes a point that authoritarians may use the internet's amusing contents to distract people from focusing on their rule – "opium of the masses", to borrow from Marxian vocabulary.

A brief look at quantitative studies that investigate the claims of both sides shows inconclusive results. While many of the quantitative studies on internet and democracy focus on the internet's democratization effect in the West – mostly in the US- some use cross-country inquiries. Two researches are particularly noteworthy in the richness of their data. One of them was produced by Jacob Groshek (2009). Using macro-level panel data from 1994 to 2003, he found that "the democratizing effect of the internet is severely limited among non-democratic countries" (2009:128). Another study by Michael Best and Keegan Wade (2009) which used various statistical data from 1992 to 2002 found that the relationship between

internet usage and democracy had strong regional dimensions. While the internet's democratization effect in authoritarian Middle Eastern countries was insignificant, the result indicated that it had better effectiveness in Asia. A common finding in both researches was that the internet had more democratization effect in countries that had already started undertaking a genuine transition to democracy than countries that could be classified as authoritarian, although neither study set a cut-off point.

Unfortunately, the limitations of both studies are glaring. First, the speed of internet diffusion in authoritarian countries has dramatically increased since the last year of data (2003). The impact of this statistically significant increase in diffusion needs to be investigated. Second, both studies did not account for what can be called the latent democratic effects of the internet. Many authoritarian countries introduced the internet cautiously; combining tight legal regulations, limitation of speed and censorship. This posed an initial challenge for users. It is plausible to assume that censorship and restrictions would be more difficult to implement as users climb the learning curve. In addition, users might need some time to move from passive usage to active participation. Third, the data of these studies was drawn mainly from the pre-web 2.0 period. The later period is credited for transforming the status of users from just information retrievers to value adders through participation, a harbinger for increased democratic engagement.

These studies and debates are generally very instructive, but also reflect the serious contentions surrounding the concept of democracy. As Paul Starr stated, "to argue about the media today is to argue about politics. Similarly, at a deeper level, conflicting views of the history of communications often reflect disagreements about democracy and its possibilities" (Starr, 2008:34). Some of the most influential works on the internet and democracy in authoritarian countries, for instance, limit themselves to a narrow boundary of democracy, to avoid conceptual overload and/or measurement problems. Others, in the same category, have deep value-based philosophical attachment to the limited versions of the conception of democracy. It is, however, unreflective of reality to claim that the more radical conceptions of democracy have no place in the discourse on the internet and democracy in authoritarian countries despite the systematic general bias of the literature in favor of the minimalist version. The next part is thus devoted to briefly restating these competing conceptions of democracy and laying down the conceptual foundation of this study.

Competing conceptions of democracy

Politics, John Rawls argued, is concerned with "political justice and the common good, and about what institutions and policies best promote them."(Rawls, 2007:1) In making decisions about these values and the shared institutions which advance

them, political communities face both procedural and substantive questions regarding settlement of pervasive contentions. We disagree with fellow community members-sometimes almost compulsively-on political questions. Who should legitimately participate in the decision making? How, and under what circumstances? Who should be bound by the decisions? Democracy is just one system of collective political decision-making which provides solutions to this disagreement problem (Cristiano, 2003:1). To make matters more complex, democracy itself is a political issue and its conception is not outside the nucleus of political controversy.

Democratic theories come in different forms and varieties. For the purpose of this paper, I use the conceptions of democracy proposed by Habermas in his essay *Three Normative Models of Democracy* (1994). All of these conceptions of democracy fall within the same tradition of political theory, but have important differences.

According to Habermas, the first of these models, the liberal conception, views democracy as an arrangement in which the divergent interests of private citizens are aggregated through competitive elections (1994: 2). He traces this view to the English philosopher John Locke. In modern times, the aggregative conception is highly influenced by Joseph Schumpeter's great post-war publication *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942). Shumepeterians don't speak in a monolithic voice; yet they agree on some fundamental pillars of democracy. They emphasize the liberty of the ancients- negative political liberties. The legitimacy of a given political arrangement is measured insofar as it gives equal consideration to interests pursued within the legally defined private boundaries of citizens. "To criticize the processes as undemocratic, then, is to claim that those processes failed to give equal consideration of each member." (Cohen, 1989:18) This aggregative model is minimalistic. The market, not the forum, is its core structure.

The opposing conception is republican. For republicans, an adversarial contest of self-regarding interests in a market-like political arrangement is too passive and, in some cases, too dangerous an ideal. They conceive political process not just in proceduralist terms, but as the fundamental constitutive element of social life, where members of a political community create solidarity through participation and deliberation, and where members--through mutual understanding and reciprocity-- articulate the common good. This maximalist view is a radical ethical approach to politics (Sandel, 1986). Perhaps, Ronald Dworkin's (2006) "Partnership Democracy" best fits this non-adversarial, non-aggregative democracy even though Dworkin himself isn't a radical maximalist.

Habermas, whose sympathies lie with the latter view, nonetheless charged modern republicanism of ethically overloading politics, of assimilating politics to "a hermeneutical process of self-explication of a shared form of life or collective identity"(Habermas, 1994:4). He proposed a third theory: the discourse theory of democracy, which argues for a "de-centered" society. By treating the political system just as one "among several subsystems" of a society, discourse theory makes a sharp distinction between political questions and ethical questions relating to the common

good. It salvages the republican roots of democracy, but steers clear of conflating the issues of justice with ethical discourse. In the sense that it calls for public reason, it is maximalist. Yet it is also proceduralist in that it calls for politics to "be structured and steered."(1994:10)

Broadly speaking, republican and discourse theory can be referred to as civic-public theories of democracy, as opposed to the liberal-aggregative theory. This dichotomy is important because, despite Habermas' insistence on the distinction, maximalist democracy theorists don't necessarily respect the sharp lines he drew. "Even if we consider some distinctions between the right and the good at philosophical and institutional levels as being essential to preserving democratic freedoms in societies in which multiple visions of the good compete," Seyla Benhabib wrote, "this distinction does not commit one to build a *cordon sanitaire* around political discourse such as to block off the articulation of issues of collective identity and visions of the good life" (1996: 7).

As Starr (2008) rightly claims, the historical narrative of the liberal-aggregative conception of democracy tends to be generally progressive. Minimalist democrats therefore instinctively believe that new technology--including the internet--always leads to increasing democratization and development. Indeed, the sources of most of the triumphalist rhetoric in the early days of the internet were minimalist democrats. "From a Schumpeterian perspective, the 'gales of creative destruction' set in motion by the rise of the internet may well bring about the collapse or retrenchment of obsolete forms of media, such as the daily printed newspaper. But effects of this kind are expected and, amid the new information cornucopia, they ought not to occasion remorse, much less, new forms of intervention"(2008:40). Yet it is minimalist democrats who are left with daunting questions to answer in the debate on the internet and democratization in authoritarian countries. Based on the dichotomous, "bounded wholes" (in the words of Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori(1987)- democracy or not democracy- conception of minimalism, democratization in authoritarian countries starts with regime change, and the internet's record of precipitating regime change in authoritarian states is so very negligible.

In contrast to minimalists, the civic-public democrats are less inclined to declare victory. They tend to see the history of democratization as that of "struggle and betrayal (Starr, 41) From Dewey to Postman to Habermas, civic-public democrats have viewed new forms of media very critically. The internet is no exception. Famous critics of the internet's democratization deficit like Cass Sunstein and Eli Noam are entrenched members of the civic-public group. Paradoxically, the more convincing cases about the positive relationship between the internet and democratization in authoritarian countries are made by the maximalist democrats. In a perceptive article, Min Jiang, for example, argued that the internet is expanding public deliberation in China. This is largely because, as previously mentioned, the internet's many-to-many architecture is suited to participation and deliberation (Jiang, 2009). In light of this, a more reliable evaluation of the internet's

democratization potential is one that uses the maximalist approach. One problem of this flexible application of democratic theories based on the nature research question is, as Patrick Bernhagen noted, "the ability of defining what the thing is independently of why one is interested in" (2009:27). Yet ensuring the reliability of an evaluation is a vital task in the social sciences, and the minimalist approach forces us to neglect a very important reality for the sake of clarity. This paper tests the maximalist case for the internet's democratization impact using the Ethiopian participatory media. The next step is to tease out a useful set of criteria for the test.

Measurements of online democratic participation

The preeminent action in the civic-public version of democracy is participation (Pateman, 1970). There is a tension among theorists of this camp regarding the normatively attractive ideals of participation. Some articulate a theory of democracy which attributes instrumentalist functions to participation. Stated more concretely, this view holds participation as a method of decision making,--its main task being "problem-solving"(Cohen, 1997) Others consider this view as too narrow. They propose a conception of participation which is "dialogic", where citizens interact with each other politically to "understand mutually the self and others, resulting in the production and reproduction of rules, shared values and public reasons for deliberation."(Kim and Kim, 2008:54)

This difference in the conception of democratic participation underpins the contention among civic-public theorists regarding the nature and sense of democratic political space. Instrumentalists, with the assumption that disagreements of political nature can be solved through deliberation, set varying-- but generally stringent--normative constraints on political space to secure democratic legitimacy (Ackerman and Fishkin, 2002; Rawls, 1999; Cohen, 1989; Dryzek, 2006; Elster, 1998). Those who emphasize the dialogic dimension of participation, however, are reluctant to set too many conditions of participation since rigorous structures and procedures are considered to excessively limit every day non-purposive political talk. The political space here is conceived as very informal (Barber, 1984).

Irrespective of these differences, it is purposeful to define a minimum set of criteria of political spaces that can be agreed upon by the contentious theorists of participation. Benkler identified five minimal "desiderata" of what he called "the public sphere": namely, universal intake, filtering for political relevance, filtering for accreditation, synthesis of public opinion, and independence from government control (2006: 182-185). Although he claims that this set of requirements is agnostic to the competing conceptions of democracy, there is little doubt that they are, at least, more relevant to the active conceptions of democracy. The aggregative conception of democracy will see a public platform constrained by any desiderata--

except those that ensure the pursuit of private interests (or aggregated individual interests) without the interest holders stepping into each other's boundaries--with stern skepticism. Benkler's requirements are too positive for that version of democratic theory.

Benker's proposal is incisive. But it misses two requirements most theorists of democratic participation would settle on: universal representation and accessibility. Universal representation is different from universal intake. While the latter looks at diversity in terms of differences of views and opinions and emphasizes that, in principle, the views and opinions of all citizens are accorded equal respect and concern, universal representation focuses on issues of political presence, the view that puts the "mirror test" on the legitimacy of a political system(Young, 1990) . The mirror test rejects the classical liberal notion that values diversity of ideas- not characteristics of the agents of the ideas- as a "damning complacency."(Phillips, 1996:141) The central message in the mirror test theory is this: who represents is as important as what is represented!

Advocates of this view approach the issue from different theoretical directions. Some raise the question of political equality and power, questioning the full legitimacy of a democracy that doesn't deal adequately with "the experiences of those social groups who by virtue of their race or ethnicity or religion or gender have felt themselves excluded from democratic process."(Phillips, 1996:141) A few others offer statistical justifications: the politics of presence as the reflection of the make-up of society. The slightly different version of the statistical argument comes from theorists of participatory democracy who put a normative requirement of transcending particular affiliations in participatory discourse, but accept that a valid question can be asked about the robustness, if not the legitimacy, of a democracy if platforms of public participation don't fairly represent the distributions of characteristics of a society. Even egalitarian liberals, who give qualified support for participatory views of democracy, recognize the mirror test in one form or another as a corrective measure of a distorted reality. Ronald Dworkin, for example, supported identity-based preferential treatment as a means of reducing the degree of identity-consciousness in society (Dworkin, 1977:224-39).

There is a theoretical possibility that a participatory political platform with universal intake and universal participation is still inaccessible to a fair chunk of citizens. We can, say, imagine a legislative body meeting with a "manageable set of political discussion points" and the presence of members of diverse groups but with significantly constraining rules of citizen petition and consultation. The story of a citizen alienated from her political system owing to its inaccessibility is a common narrative of books and surveys about modern politics. This pervasive anxiety is not necessarily just a result of lack of representation of one's ideas as some commentators would like us to believe. It is, to a large extent, a result of the feeling of losing control and power. Civic-public democrats put a great premium on citizens' engagement in political process. A participatory political platform which doesn't

have a fair degree of accessibility to citizens potentially founders on its alienation of citizens from the political system.

Added to Benkler's (2006:182-85) desiderata, these two criteria form a promising, empirically useful, set of requirements for a participatory political platform. Given these criteria, how much has the internet democratized authoritarian political spaces? The next part is devoted to defining and classifying these authoritarian spaces.

Criterion	question
Universal representation	To what extent does the platform of participation reflect the distribution of characteristics of the population?
Universal intake	To what extent does the platform of participation represent ideas and opinions of citizens?
Accessibility	How open is the platform of public participation to citizens?
Political relevance	How reasonably does the platform of public participation decipher views and opinions of citizens which are appropriate for collective political action?
Accreditation	How well does the platform of public participation decipher opinions and views which are credible?
Synthesis of public opinion	How well does the platform of public participation sort out different views and opinions into clusters of articulated opinions and views ready to be used as inputs for collective action?
Independence	How independent is the platform of public participation from the control of government?

Authoritarian participatory Spaces

It may seem odd to couple the words "authoritarian" and "participatory spaces" in the same sentence. After all, authoritarianism is often defined as a system of government which denies such spaces to the citizenry. Civic public democrats insist that the primary condition of political participation is protection from coercion, and it verges on tautology to say the main source of power for authoritarians is coercion-backed command, not the will of a participatory majority.

Yet authoritarian rulers know that their power cannot be sustained with command alone. As the Chinese Political scientist He Baogang (2006) keenly observed, authoritarian elites understand that they have to "channel and contain political demand, generate information about society and policy, co-opt protest and maintain order, provide forums for and exchange with businesses in a marketizing economy, increase credible transparency, deflect responsibility onto processes and generate legitimacy", thus opening up spaces for controlled public participation in order to achieve those goals. The unexpected collapse of some seemingly well-entrenched authoritarian regimes and the remarkable persistence of others is partly a function of how well they balance command with participatory approaches. Three spaces of authoritarian participation are of particular importance: (a) selectorate spaces; (b) permitted spaces/ tolerated spaces; (c) underground spaces.

    a. ***Selectorate spaces***. There are some groups which are the bases of authoritarian rule; the military or the intelligence or the political party or key members of the influential elite. Economists Tim Besely and Masa Kudamatsu(2007) referred to these groups as the "selectorate". Although the strength of the selectorate differs from one authoritarian regime to another, the members generally have more privileges of participation in the regime's decision making process than the non-member citizens. Given that, spaces where members of the selectorate participate are the most crucial arenas of politics of authoritarian regimes.

    b. ***Permitted Spaces/Tolerated space.*** Analytically, the two spaces signify different arenas of participation, but the level of control of laws and legal institutions in authoritarian countries practically makes the analytical distinction between permission and toleration almost irrelevant. Permitted spaces are generally legally defined and regulated and it is where the independent media, civil society and academia operate. Theoretically, permitted spaces are the most well-defined of the authoritarian participatory arenas as their parameter is set by the law. Yet they can shrink and expand depending on the challenges they pose on the regimes. The task of manipulating the size of these spaces using the interpretation and re-interpretation of the regulatory laws is often left to a subordinate-or co-opted- judiciary.

Tolerated spaces are conceptually different. They are the results of one the well-known internal contradictions of authoritarian regimes. This contradiction arises from the co-existence of institutionalized and formalized power with irregular power. On the one hand, authoritarians want predictability and stability that are crucial to deliver economic growth, maintain social order, increase effectiveness of decision-making and decrease the cost of decision enforcement. On the other hand, stable institutions make the power of civil servants, army and security officers, bureaucrats and other personnel who don't belong to the selectorate secure. This causes a potential risk of what political scientists call "layering"; a gradual, but sure and effective, layering "new institutions onto the old ones", often out of the sight of authoritarian rulers. Authoritarians try to negotiate this dilemma by largely formalizing power, but wielding enough irregular power to preempt layering. Tolerated spaces are functions of this black hole of authoritarian power. They fall outside of regulatory frameworks and formalized power, and their parameters are purposively made to be indiscernible.

c. ***Underground spaces.*** These are spaces that are outside the permission, toleration and control of authoritarian regimes; ungoverned arenas of participation. The history of authoritarianism is replete with examples of protests and rebellion hatched and fostered in underground spaces.

Two points: First, the theoretical distinction amongst these spaces may in practice be very blurred. What appears to be a permitted space based on a fair reading of the law and the practice of formal institutions of power can easily evolve into the underground spaces category by a series of judicial decisions or politically motivated changes in institutional practices. Even a selectorate space isn't insulated from this uncertainty. Far from it! Given that the most credible challenges against authoritarian leaders quite often come from the inner circle, repression of the selectorate participatory space in the face of reasonable(sometimes not) threats is not uncommon. Second, although the three spaces exist in all authoritarian countries, their sizes and dynamics are different from regime to regime. More generally, the size of the participatory spaces are larger-and participation more robust- in authoritarianisms with adjectives than full-scale authoritarianisms.

The second point is important in the context of the focus of this project. The limited cross-country quantitative inquiries tentatively indicate that the internet's democratization effect increases with the increase in the degree of openness. Theoretically this is plausible because (1) the degree of internet adoption itself is usually co-related to the degree of openness; (2) it is easier to expand the outer limits of spaces that are broader than spaces that are highly constrained.

From a theoretical point of view, I am now in a position to restate my arguments.

(I)   The internet's democratization effect in authoritarian countries is best evaluated by participatory conceptions of democracy.

(II)   The degree of democratization of participatory platforms can be evaluated based on seven attractive criteria.

(III)   All authoritarians have participatory spaces, but the spaces in authoritarianisms with adjectives are generally broader than the spaces in full scale authoritarianisms.

(IV)   The internet has a democratization effect in authoritarian countries if we use the participatory conceptions of democracy as the theoretical underpinnings for our evaluation, and the democratization effect increases with the increase in the size of participatory spaces.

In the next part, I turn to testing these arguments. The authoritarian country selected for testing is Ethiopia and the specific ecology singled out for focus is participatory media.[4]

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[4] By participatory media, I mean many-to-many media, such as social networking sites, blogs, wikis, paltalk forums, collaborative news sites, static websites with a number of contributors. This is not an exhaustive list. The most developed political participatory media in Ethiopia are blogs and static websites with many contributors. I will focus on the two.

3. Revolutionary Democracy and the Media in Ethiopia's 'Second Republic'

In May 1991, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front--a coalition of Marxist rebel groups--seized power, ending 17 years of military rule and forming the "Ethiopian Second Republic" (Abbinik, 2009). The ideological underpinning of the "Second Republic" is revolutionary democracy (EPRDF, 1993). This notion of democracy proffers a radical answer to the questions of self-determination for "oppressed" ethnic groups, which found little sympathy under the "First Republic"[5]. At the forefront of this radical answer lie two solutions: first, the rights of self-determination (up to secession) of ethnic groups are articulated and accorded constitutional protection.[6] Second, the Ethiopian state is deconstructed into an amalgam of ethnic autonomies. Politics are then generally ethnicized in what Brietzke(1995) called "Ethiopia's leap in the dark". Another of revolutionary democracy's claims is the establishment of a state that plays a core role in driving economic development. Although this conception of the state's role is deeply rooted in Marxist tradition, the EPRDF correspondingly redefined it to fit the post-cold war international ideological setting and discourse (EPRDF, 1993, EPRDF, 2001, EPRDF, 2006).

The two basic tenets of revolutionary democracy (i.e. the deconstruction of the Ethiopian state and the establishment of a predominant role for the state in economic affairs) have **since** been guaranteed political incontestability in Ethiopia by a systematically entrenched, three-phased hegemony of power. The first monopolistic phase, the era of the "façade electoral regime", ran from 1995-2000. During this period there was no meaningful contestation of power, despite the emergence of institutions of political competition (Vestal, 1999). A 1993 EPRDF strategy document openly stated that the existence of such institutions, as well as opposition political forces and the media, were important due to the demands of Western "imperialist forces." This strategy document further noted the Front's worry that the United States could mobilize these forces to cut vital economic aid to the country if the Front was seen as too protective of the rights "of the masses." The EPRDF, the document argued, ought to accordingly pretend to be in lockstep with America. While declaring elections as the only legitimate mechanism of transfer of political power and enshrining the rights of free expression, assembly and association within the country's constitution, the Front, however, ensured that parties with a competitive social base were removed from the sphere of political contest. Thus the Front managed to control both horizontal and vertical power (EPRDF, 1993).

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[5] This is Abbinik's terminology for the "Popular Democratic Republic of Ethiopia", which was established by the military council (the Derg) in 1984.

[6] The FDRE Constitution's (1995) article 39 promulgates the right of self-determination of ethnic groups.

Platforms of public participation were immoderately constrained throughout this primary phase. An excessively broad application of a draconian law regulating the conduct of the press led to the prosecution and imprisonment of tens of journalists (Megenta, 2007). Other subtle forms of media suppression included the dramatic increase of taxes on imported papers, selective allocation of state advertisements, intense harassment and intimidation and punishing fines and bail bonds. Working under these conditions, the exclusively print-based private media utterly failed to evolve into a mature and full-fledged public sphere, where proprietors and journalists could aspire to meet the requirements of platforms of public participation. The quality of the newspapers remained unacceptably low; their combined circulation number was pitiable (Skijerdal and Lule, 2007).

Public media, both print and broadcast, did not fare any more desirably. They were entirely government-controlled, heavily censored and geared to work as propaganda machines; constitutional rules of intake, relevance and representation were ignored entirely. Such was the level of government intervention in the production and publication processes of the public media, that some programs were not even broadcast without the authorization of security officials (Gebereab, 2009).

The second phase of the power hegemony occurred between 2001 and 2005. It began with an important split among the top brass of the core EPRDF group, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), in the aftermath of the Ethio-Eritrean war. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's faction emerged as victor and presented itself to the world as a modern, democratic and open group, without relinquishing the tenets of revolutionary democracy.[7] In a 2001 paper, the Prime Minister presented revolutionary democracy as one idea in a pluralistic public sphere, albeit the only one with coherent solutions for Ethiopia's problems. He argued that it was possible to make the people of Ethiopia believers in revolutionary democracy, while allowing space for competing liberal democratic ideas. In one memorable paragraph, he conjured a striking vision of the religious embrace of revolutionary democracy**:**

> *When revolutionary democracy permeates the entire Ethiopian society, individuals will start to think alike and all persons will cease having their own independent outlook. In this order, individual thinking becomes simply part of collective thinking because the individual will not be in a position to reflect on concepts that have not been prescribed by revolutionary democracy.* (Zenawi, 2001)

This brief romance with the notion of commingling political pluralism and power hegemony had short-lived positive effects on democratization (Lyons, 2006). Progress was made in the reforming and opening up of the arenas of political contestation. In 2004, two opposition coalitions were formed and registered to

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[7] See *Meles and the Plotters*, in The Economist, March 2004, online:
http://www.economist.com/node,541137, accessed 21-03-2010

compete in the general elections the following year (Aalen and Tronvoll, 2009:194). They held public meetings and demonstrations in many places throughout the country, creating formidable organizational networks. Although the National Democratic Institution and the National Republic Institution were prevented from monitoring these elections, other credible groups such as the European Union and the Carter Center were given observers' status. Additionally, domestic civil society groups enhanced their scope of participation in human rights and governance advocacy issues. In early 2005, some of these groups stepped-up their involvement in election-related activities, educating voters and members of government institutions on civic rights and ethical election conduct. The government's interference in judicial decision-making also gradually lessened, providing maverick judges the opportunity to make decisions outside of the interests of the ruling party.

The media, and particularly the private media, was even less controlled. The number of fresh prosecutions against journalists dropped dramatically. The increasing annual tax on imported papers leveled off, pushing inflation-adjusted printing costs down. While selective allocation of state advertisements persisted, some members of the media that received a large share of such advertising freely criticized the government without fear of retaliatory advertisement withdrawals. In what many considered to be a positive gesture, government officials openly debated the new draft broadcast law with other stakeholders, including representatives from the media and civil society groups. Following criticism, the government slowed the legislative process, incorporating some of the suggestions and agreeing to allow more time for deliberation (Megenta, 2007).

Despite the enormous increase in press freedom, the private media generally failed to work for the fulfillment of the demands of a genuinely democratic platform of public participation. They, rather, acted largely as mouthpieces of the opposition. Intake, accreditation, representation and relevance--each important requirements of a robust media – were frequently neglected. This extreme partisanship reached its pinnacle during and after the elections. Some observers noted that the repression of the 1990s made it impossible for the emergence of a private media capable of prudently using its newfound freedoms. Indeed, by the beginning of the last decade, journalism had become one of the least attractive professions to the educated section of Ethiopia's population, owing to the security challenges and deep institutional problems of the media business. The journalists who remained in the profession along with those who had freshly joined were largely people of enormous courage, determination and aspiration, but of gaping deficiencies in skill and understanding of the role of their profession. Yet the fact that both the small number of truly skilled practitioners of the trade and the newspapers with comparably strong institutional setups did not act better than the others calls for a more comprehensive explanation of the state and conduct of the press during the Revolutionary II Era (Megenta, 2007).

The relaxation of public media control came in the later part of this era, and was mainly limited to elections. Vigorous election debates among representatives of

political parties contesting for power were widely broadcast, and mainly uncensored. Airtime was allocated to various political parties for free political advertisements; demonstrations and meetings of opposition parties were accorded news coverage. Apart from these admittedly significant developments, the public media was, however, largely insulated from the relative openness of the Revolutionary Democracy II Period. Interviews with ruling party officials revealed that their caution in opening up the public media was calculated, primarily attributed to the fear that a complete freeing-up of the public sphere would lead to unexpected challenges to their power. They were willing to take a calculated gamble, "however, making TV and radio completely free could be a gamble too far."[8]

Yet the results of the 2005 elections and the subsequent existential threat to EPRDF's power hegemony mounted by the opposition proved that the gamble they had taken had already gone too far--leading them to recognize the incompatibility of power hegemony and pluralism and reverse entirely the trends of democratization that began in 2001. Thus, a new era of repression and control was ushered in (Abbinik, 2009:11).

This third era of revolutionary democracy has so far been marked by three basic features: first, there has been a successive issuance of laws that overly constrain freedoms of speech, organization, assembly and demonstration. Although EPRDF has never shunned the use of legislative restraints, the number of laws issued and the overall similarity of objectives make this period unique. In March 2008, a new law governing political parties and elections was promulgated, followed by legislation restricting freedom of the media and then the status of civil society groups. A year later, a harsh anti-terrorism law was passed by parliament despite protestations by international donors and local civic groups. The combination of these four legislations has served to make organizing and expressing dissenting political views extremely difficult (Aalen and Tronvoll, 2009). Second, repression has intensified. The government continues to employ both judicial and informal mechanisms to intimidate, deter and punish opponents of power.[9] The number of documented cases of human rights abuses has accordingly increased considerably. Third, a new mix of cooption and intimidation has been used to massively recruit members to the party. In early 2010, the number of EPRDF members crossed the five million mark (more than 6% of the population), surpassing the percentage of Chinese citizens in the Communist Party (Megenta 2008).

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[8] Interview with anonymous official A(2008)

[9] See for a detailed review of the condition of human rights: 2008 Human Rights Reports: Ethiopia, US Bureau of democracy, Human Rights and Labor, February 2009, online: http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/af/119001.htm, accessed 07-03-2010

In the last five years, platforms of public participation have gradually narrowed to virtual non-existence. In early 2010 only a handful of independent newspapers, with a total circulation of less than 50 thousand copies a week, remained in the publishing business--most of them suffering from a combination of high printing costs and limited access to government printing presses. Popular newspapers (like Asqual, Menelik, Ethiop, Abay, Addis Zena, Netsanet and Satena) that were shut down in the aftermath of the elections were denied licenses necessary to resume publication. Imprisonment and intimidation of journalists has also intensified. Not since 1991 has the public media been exposed to this degree of control.

In light of the developments of the last five years, some scholars doubt the value of calling Ethiopia's ruling party anything but a full-scale authoritarian regime; most spaces of political competition in Ethiopia are now completely closed. Reflecting the death of political contents, the two recent electoral results ended in Soviet-style 99.9% and 99.6% wins for the ruling party. The problem is therefore no longer violation of the criteria for democracy and the resulting uneven playing field of contest, but the vanishing of the playing field altogether. Such events triggered two authoritative scholars on Ethiopian politics to contend that the only apparent remaining avenue of power competition open to the opposition is "armed struggle"-- a radical proclamation!

It is neither disregard for these political developments nor naïve optimism that has led me to classify the regime as authoritarianism with adjectives. A researcher of politics needs to be cautious in categorizing the complex realities of political transformations during their period of volatility. I believe Ethiopia is presently in that stage. The trend reveals the decaying of the regime, but it is a touch too soon to label it a full-scale authoritarian regime. This year's Freedom House Index of Freedom in the World captures the reality very well. Ethiopia's score is 5 points, placing it in the category of states that are "partly free". However, the analysis states that there is a pronounced setback of political freedoms and civil rights in the country, leaving it just above the zone of "unfree" countries (Freedom House, 2010). There remains an analytical distinction between "unfreedom" and "full-scale authoritarianism"--the former being a bit broader than the latter. Yet, in many cases, the practical differences between the two are whittled down almost to zero. Ethiopia's Polity IV Authority Trend Score (Polity IV, 2009), for example, is very consistent with the country's score in the Index of Freedom in the World (Freedom House, 2009).

Authority Trends, 1946-2008: Ethiopia
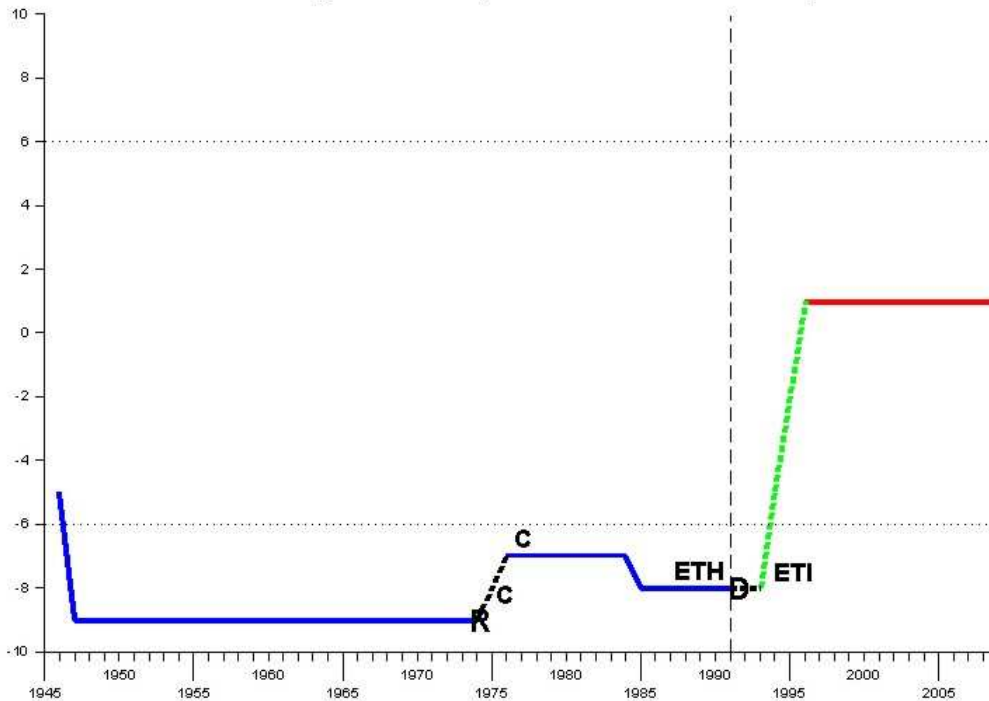
(Source: Polity IV)

Internet in Ethiopia

Before analyzing the significance of the Ethiopian participatory media as tool of democratization, it is important to provide operational context. With a measly 0.4% of its population with internet access, Ethiopia's internet penetration rate is the second lowest in Africa (ITU, 2009). This ITU figure is, however, contested by some analysts. The ITU method of sending survey forms to government agencies and asking them to complete the forms has a tendency to underestimate the number of internet users in developing countries, where many people access the internet through internet cafes, government and private organizations, work places and academic institutions. A researcher at Addis Ababa University, for example, estimates a much higher 1.2% penetration rate in Ethiopia. Yet even this number would put the country in the bottom ten percent of sub-Saharan Africa, nearly equal to the penetration rate in Egypt a decade ago (Melkamu, 2009).

According to Market Research Reports (2010), 94% of the country's internet users are concentrated within the capital city of Addis Ababa. This figure establishes

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Ethiopia as the country with the most unequal distribution of internet access in the world. Most users in Ethiopia are termed by scholars as "one night standers"-- accessing the internet very infrequently, mainly to check e-mails from relatives and friends living overseas (Melkamu, 2009). Frequent internet users are disproportionately young, male and educated. A survey of 139 frequent internet users in Addis Ababa in early 2008 shows that most of them use it primarily for email exchanges and as their main source of sports news. Only 24% of these respondents claimed that they used the internet to consume political information. Some studies argue that wealth disparities in developing countries lead to unequal access to the internet; this is true of Ethiopia to a limited extent. While all of the frequent users in the survey earned more than 400 birr (35 dollars) a month, the impact of wealth on distribution diminished dramatically beyond a monthly income of 1350 birr (Melkamu, 2009).

Market Research Reports (2010) predicts that the number of users will rapidly increase in the next four years, with the penetration rate climbing to nearly 8%. This prediction is based on the government's promise to liberalize the telecom sector and expand access to the internet. At the beginning of June 2010, the government announced its plan to extend the existing 7,000 kms of fibre optics to 10,000 kms by October 2010. It also recently announced the appointment of a French company to partner with the Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation (a government monopoly) for assistance in technical and managerial operations.[10] Many analysts are, however, unsure that these promises of liberalization will be delivered. In the past ten years there have been numerous false starts in ICT development in Ethiopia. The government's ideological interest in benefiting exclusively from the huge profits of the telecommunication sector, in combination with its political commitment to controlling the flow of information, has so far completely blocked the liberalization of this sector.

Indeed, most of the strategies incorporated within the government's approach to internet expansion are closer to the model followed by Cuba than China, although much of the writings on the internet in Ethiopia use China as a framing case. While China's approach is "the promotion of rapid, market-driven diffusion" (Kalathil and Boas, 2003:7), Ethiopia relies on the central allocation and control of the resource. Ethiopia's similarity to China is rather largely related to the use of filtering, monitoring and surveillance as instruments of controlling political communication. The Ethiopian government began using these tools in 2006 when it first blocked blogs and web publications run by its opponents and dissidents. A few months later, it strengthened its monitoring and surveillance efforts by requiring internet cafes to register the names and addresses of their customers. The move was taken as an

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[10] See: http://www.panpa.org.au/ThreadView.aspx?tid=35408, accessed 11-06-2010

effort to track users who were engaged in online activism and the reading of political blogs.[11]

Between 2006 and 2010, the government escalated its control efforts by expanding the list of prime targets for filtering. The websites of international human rights organizations Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Committee to Protect Journalists, and Reporters without Borders have all become inaccessible in Ethiopia (ONI, 2009). A more sophisticated "cognitive intervention" model of control was further added in late 2007; government-paid "interveners" monitor multidirectional participatory platforms and use diversionary and disruptive tactics to change both the substance and style of discourse in the direction of their choosing.[12]

Filtering	no evidence	suspected	selective	substantial	pervasive
Political				…	
Social			…		
Conflict/security				…	
Internet tools					

(Source: ONI[2009])

Yet as the detailed case studies that I offer in the subsequent sections of the paper highlight, these efforts at control and the limited number of internet users in Ethiopia have not totally obliterated the online participatory media's direct and indirect impact in opening up new spheres of dissemination of information and public discourse.

The Genesis of Participatory Media as an Alternative PPP

The seeds of participatory media were sown in the early 1990s when an Ethiopian email distribution network called EDDN was formed. The network's main mission was to act as a forum for Ethiopians to exchange views. By the mid-1990s, Ethiopians in the Diaspora were able to glean news about life in Ethiopia from people back home (albeit a very few people, mainly in academia) and engage in extensive discussions. Most of the members had strong anti-government views and the deliberations reflected those sentiments. EDDN remained the only platform of e-participation for the next six years. In 1997, Kitaw Yayehirad, an Ethiopian IT

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[11] Notes from CPJ, ONI, RSF

[12] Interview with anonymous official A(2008)

specialist living in Geneva, started networking Ethiopians using his website cyberethiopia.com and its affiliate, ethioline.com. This was the first Ethiopian web-based forum of exchange of information and views (Megenta, 2005).

But the most important political website was one established in 1998 by an anonymous Ethiopian writer under the name "Dagmawi". This was a personal page linked to authoritative scholarly articles, news and opinions about the Ethio-Eritrean War (1998-2000) on Yahoo's now defunct Geocities. Dagmawi also often wrote sharp, concise and erudite comments about the war. Although his writings supported Ethiopia's "war of self-defense", Dagmawi was not an uncritical supporter of the Ethiopian government. His critiques of the government's diplomatic approach and the tactical issues of war were considered the most thorough and widely acclaimed (Megenta, 2008). Throughout the war, his page remained the "go-to" site for academics, domestic and international journalists and diplomats. The Reporter, one of Ethiopia's leading papers, published Dagmawi's comments regularly, giving them wide exposure among Ethiopian readers. "In a time when the Ethiopian government was losing the battle to win international public opinion, Dagmawi played a crucial role in bolstering the Ethiopian case" (Melkamu, 2009).

Dagmawi's site was a milestone in the genesis of Ethiopia's participatory media because it had the most rudimentary elements of a networked information economy. By publishing the site on a free pad, Dagmawi eliminated the costs of "becoming a speaker" and his newfound status, as the most authoritative voice on a significant political issue without being a member of the established media or appearing in a traditional media outlet, was a precursor to the hub-and-spoke network architecture that marked the web 2.0 era. Dagmawi's efforts inspired Biniyam Kebede, an Ethiopian living in Canada, to start another personal website which, among other things, introduced news aggregation.

Another significant point in time was the year 2000. This year marked the decision of Elias Kifle, the young publisher and editor-in-chief of Ethiopian Review--one of Ethiopia's prominent magazines--to discontinue the print edition of the magazine and publish exclusively online. This decision was an illustration of the increasing importance of web-based media. Ethiopian Review would later become one of the most influential and popularly followed Ethiopian participatory media **sources**, incorporating multidirectional platforms of public participation such as blogs and discussion forums. In 2001, several websites--including some that have since become household names, like ethiomedia.com and nazret.com--were created.

By the end of 2005, the number of political or quasi-political websites with multidirectional participatory platforms numbered at least 57 (Megenta and Mekonnen, 2005). The political blogosphere, in particular, was blossoming--prompting the BBC to label them "a small, but growing set of citizen journalists."[13]

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[13] A.Heavens, African Bloggers Find Their Voice, BBC, Online:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4512290.stm, accessed 10-03-2010

While pre-2005 blogging was an exclusively Diaspora phenomenon, the elections in 2005 marked the arrival of homeland bloggers on the scene. Urael, Ethio Zagol, Dina, Adebabay Ze'Ethiopia, Tsegasaurus and Roha garnered immediate recognition in the blogosphere for their first-hand reports and authoritative accounts of politics in Ethiopia. Foreign bloggers living in Addis Ababa and writing about Ethiopian politics also became an integral part of the Ethiopian blogosphere.

The Ethiopian participatory media has shrunk considerably over the past two years. Following the acrimonious split of the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy, (CUD)--which many of the writers openly and enthusiastically embraced--as well as the government's successful efforts in blocking websites within Ethiopia, many prominent bloggers and web publishers ceased their online political activities. Yet the mixture of remnants of the "old guard" and newcomers has kept the ecosystem still lively, if not robust.

Overview of Ethiopia's Participatory Media

Three factors make the study of the Ethiopian participatory media very difficult. The first is the absence of a culture of linking to one another. Most studies that map online publics use the systematic analysis of linking patterns to understand the structural features of the sphere. It is noted that this approach to the study of online publics is "based on the principle that macro structure arises from the tendency of individuals to link more frequently to things that they are interested in"(Etling et al., 2009:13) This principle is often referred to as the homophily principle. "People's personal networks are homogeneous with regard to many sociodemographic, behavioral, and intrapersonal characteristics. Homophily limits people's social worlds in a way that has powerful implications for the information they receive, the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience" (McPherson et al., 2001:i)

Students of online media have used linking patterns as analytical tools to identify the ties and relationships in the online world – the cyber version of the homophily principle. Although the study of such patterns in order to understand structural features has not always proved successful, it remains the best tool of analysis to date (Etling et al., 2009:13). Considering the homophily principle, it is curious that Ethiopian blogs and other forms of participatory media link to each other very intermittently. One may see links to other websites in the blogrolls of many of the Ethiopian online media, but these seldom-revised lists say little about which websites the publishers visit and read frequently. A better understanding of this behavior can be gained through the analysis of linking patterns in individual posts. Unlike the online publics of many countries, there is virtually no social norm of linking within the posts themselves.

Second, there are very few Ethiopian websites dedicated to acting as information banks of the Ethiopian participatory media. Websites like oromiatimes.com and ethiopianreview.com attempt to function as web-directories, but they focus on

particular clusters of the ecosystem. Some blog aggregators, such as eliaskifle.com and digethiopia.com, have served as useful tools for keeping track of Ethiopia's blogging world through following links to the stories they aggregate. Yet *because* they cast their nets so wide it makes this process very time consuming.

I began my study by gathering a large set of the URLS of Ethiopian participatory political websites, downloading lists of them from online directories and blogrolls according to the top ten most read Ethiopian websites (based on alexa.com figures). I was able to identify 89 political websites that use participatory platforms. I used alexa.com to observe the traffic rankings of each website for the year 2009 and discarded sites with a traffic ranking of below 5,000,000, as their readership numbers were too small to be considered as truly participatory even within the context of the very low numbers of internet users in Ethiopia. I was then left with 49 websites. I retrieved the front page of each of these websites for March 15, 2009. Based on front-page content and their blogrolls, I labeled their political orientation. The next step was to verify whether my manual typology conformed to an automatic web content analysis. Using the tool icite, I managed to identify the ten most prominently used political vocabularies of each of the websites. In the case of the nine websites where my manual labeling did not conform to the automatic content analysis results, I conducted an in-depth exploratory analysis of the websites. In all of the cases, my first manual labeling proved to be right.

Although these websites raised a wide range of topics of concern and perspectives, they were mainly concentrated in three principal clusters: Integrationist, Oromo and Pro-government. These clusters each have their distinct issues, ethos and substance of discourse; the political borders among them are very sharp. Both Integrationist and Oromo clusters strongly disapprove of the current government but the reasons for their disapproval are different, if not irreconcilably clashing. Integrationists think that the government has weakened Ethiopia by ethnicizing politics. The main concern in the Oromo cluster is that of too little autonomy to Ethiopia's various ethnic groups. In this respect the differences are minimal; both shun crossing each other's boundaries and participating in the discourse of the "other". But complete disregard of the other's discourse becomes comparably greater in the Integrationist territory than the Oromo one. My finding reveals that this form of enclave participation is one of the most striking features of the Ethiopian participatory media.

Pro-government websites appear less ideological than the others, concentrating mainly on rebutting arguments and attacks from the other clusters, albeit--in the post-1970s Ethiopian political tradition--the rebuttals are cloaked in lofty-sounding ideological vocabularies. As this is generally a reactive cluster, the participants freely cross to other clusters (mainly Integrationist) to involve in the deliberations of the "others" and link to both clusters when they want to react to or attack individual posts.

Integrationist Cluster

This cluster is the most robust and participatory of the three clusters. It contains the most widely read of Ethiopian online media, such as Ethiopianreview, Ethiomedia and Nazret. Most of the websites within this group are published by Ethiopians living in North America and Europe. These publishers are largely middle-aged, college-educated men who support themselves by working other jobs; publishing the websites is usually a part-time activity. Most of them use their websites as tools for political campaigning, propaganda and organization. In fact, they have played key roles in mobilizing Ethiopian Diaspora involvement in contentious politics through financial donations and participation in protest demonstrations in European and American cities. Opposition leaders write and appear in these sites. Their influence is such that Integrationist politicians, both at home and within the Diaspora, carefully court many of them. In this manner they are similar to those whom Marc Lynch has labeled "activist bloggers" in the Arab world (Lynch, 2007:11)

The prime political target of Integrationists is the ruling party and its model of state formation. They reject the political trajectory of the ruling party, claiming that it is based on "partial criteria of political organization, such as kinship, religion, or ethnicity, which highlight differences at the expense of what Ethiopians share".[14] They argue that EPRDF's ethnicization of politics risks the fragmentation of the country or, at the very least, its weakening. Yet members of the Integrationist cluster do not speak in a monolithic voice. One could, for analytical purposes, identify two main views within the group: Universalist and Historical. Universalist Integrationists are those whose opposition to the state formation model of the ruling party arises from their deep commitment to classical liberal values that put the individual at the heart of a state or community. Dagmawi's blog and ethiopundit.blogspot.com have, for instance, been stalwarts of this view. The central thesis of Historical Integrationists relates to their interpretation of historical experiences. They claim that what historically divides Ethiopians on issues of kinship and ethnicity is less than what unites them. We are diverse, their argument goes, but we are united; "diversity in unity," as a famous Ethiopian philosopher puts it.(Mennasemay, 2010) Most of the political writings in Abraha Belay's ethiomedia.com or Elias Kifle's ethiopianreview.com reflect such sentiments and philosophical dispositions.

In the last few years, the intensity of intolerance to ethnic politics has gradually declined within the Integrationist camp, with such prominent cluster figures such as Messay Kebede advocating for the retention of EPRDF-introduced ethnic rights. As Messay's various arguments revealed, this movement towards greater tolerance is

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[14]See: http://www.ethioplanet.com/medrek/viewtopic.php?f=6&t=4788&start=0

less prompted by ideological shifts than utilitarian political calculations – a belief that such concessions ought to be made to create a united front against the EPRDF. [15]

With ideology losing its predominant position within Integrationist discourse, issues surrounding the protection of human rights and economic development have moved to the foreground. This cluster features a number of writers who document and criticize the EPRDF's human rights abuses. Some also contest Ethiopia's official economic figures and strongly disapprove of the ruling party's economic policies. Many participants within this cluster also eschew western support of the ruling party. In 2008, most of the blogs and the web publications actively supported then-Senator Barack Obama's presidential bid, on the grounds that he was the best candidate to change US policy towards Ethiopia. Although Obama's support among the Integrationist community remains high, articles that criticize the evolving US policy on Ethiopia have begun to appear. Participants are not, however, limited to talking solely about these issues. The cluster features fierce, and often acrimonious, debates on the best strategy to topple the government.

Oromo Cluster

This cluster is focused primarily on the issues of decolonization, self-determination and autonomy for the Oromo ethnic group, the largest in Ethiopia. As within the Integrationist cluster, publications that belong to this group are largely based in North America and Europe, with the twin cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis serving as the hubs for the majority of them. The proprietors are political activists deeply involved in the quest of the Oromo people for self-determination. Much like members of the Integrationist cluster, they have well-documented close relationships with movements and political organizations that share these demands.

The Oromo cluster is generally "anti-Abyssinian" hegemony. Members renounce both the ruling party and Integrationists. Writers in this sphere consider the feud between the two as a battle between family members who disagree on how to maintain hegemony of power in a state constructed on the exploitation, oppression and subjugation of historically self-governing ethnic groups. The discourse exhibits different levels of sophistication, with blog writers on sites such as Gadaa.com displaying knowledgeable depth on the various ideological strains and philosophical positions surrounding the issue; whereas the more widely read websites like

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[15]See Messay's views and subsequent comments on: http://harowo.com/2009/03/31/ethnicity-and-the-tilting-balance-of-ethiopian-politics-by-messay-kebede-ph-d/

oromoindex.com and jimmatimes.com publish articles with varying degrees of knowledge on these same issues as well as differing standards of articulation. Writers within this cluster sometimes disagree on the extent of self-rule they demand. The Federalists argue that greater autonomy under the existing system of ethnic federalism is enough, or certainly within the realm of political possibility; others claim that those questions are a matter for the Oromo people to decide through self-determination. Some within the latter camp demand nothing less than complete independence from Ethiopia.

With setbacks to military efforts and the internal divisions of the Oromo Liberation Front, the most popular political organization among participants of the cluster, the most radical voices within this cluster have fizzled out and the ideological battles have gradually given way to concerns about the protection of human rights of the Oromos. In that respect, the shift in discourse appears very similar to that witnessed in the rival Integrationist cluster.

Pro-government Cluster

This is the least vibrant of the three clusters. The principal participatory web publication is aigaforum.com, a site published by San Jose-based Ethiopian IT specialist Isayas Abay. Since 2009, Ethiopiafirst, one of the earliest Ethiopian participatory websites, has joined the group. The remaining pro-government participatory platforms are infrequently updated and usually recycle articles from the principal website. Both Aigaforum and Ethiopiafirst are considered the least ideological of Ethiopian websites.

Aigaforum claims that it was started to counteract the influence of "divisive mushrooming blogs and websites attacking the government of Ethiopia." Early prime targets of its critical arsenal were supporters of the anti-Meles Zenawi group during the much-publicized 2001 TPLF split. With the power of the purged group receding, the website quickly broadened its scope to include general Ethiopian politics. The 2005 elections established it as the nucleus of government reaction to Diaspora opposition accusations. In 2006, Aigaforum significantly increased its attacks on Diaspora opponents of the regime. This was the year that Ethiopians living in the United States successfully lobbied the House of Representatives to consider legislation tying non-military American aid to Ethiopia to human rights and good governance. Realizing the power of the Diaspora, the ruling party engaged a multi-pronged public relations and cooption effort in the US. This semi-independent, pro-government website was considered an integral part of the public relations effort; leading this offensive were high-ranking government officials writing under pseudonyms.

The case of ethiopiafirst.com is rather more mysterious. Its founder and editor, Biniyam Kebede, was initially regarded as one of the most sober voices within the

Ethiopian participatory media ecosystem. He was a thoughtful critic of the government on issues of sovereignty and hunger-reduction, but challenged the opposition to be less vitriolic and more constructive in their approach. Then, in 2008, the website began allocating less and less space to government critics, gradually evolving into a robust, yet subtle, defender of the ruling party. Like Aigaforum, Ethiopiafirst's prime targets of attack are Diaspora opponents of the Ethiopian government.

The Pro-government cluster is not, however, exclusively reactive. In line with the official claim that the ruling party's tarnished image is primarily the result of a pre-2005 failure to circulate information detailing its successful undertakings, this cluster also publishes stories and pictures trumpeting the country's positive strides under the leadership of Meles Zenawi.

I now turn to the assessment of the role of these clusters in opening up authoritarian spaces, based on the evaluative criteria I established in the first section. Many observers of the Ethiopian online ecosystem are quick to dismiss it as a collection of vitriolic echo chambers. I am sympathetic to this view but, as many of these stories demonstrate, within authoritarian countries even echo chambers are not without value.

Selectorate Space

The fundamental features of deliberative practices within authoritarian selectorate are secrecy and the presentation of a monolithic view in public (Boix and Svolik, 2009). Authoritarian rulers often portray divisions in a society as weaknesses. Eliminating these weaknesses is among the very pretexts supplied to justify their authoritarian rule. The logic of this argument suggests that publicly displaying any sign of internal disagreement within the selectorate is self-defeating for the regime, hence, the afore-mentioned features. Both features necessarily rule out selectorate deliberation in open and participatory online platforms. Members of this key group are also naturally very skeptical of creating their own online "shadow-publics", password protected platforms that are inaccessible to non-members, owing to the general insecurity of the internet. The implication of this reality is that online platforms do little to expand selectorate spaces. But, as the Ethiopian experience shows, little does not mean none.

The EPRDF follows a very strict form of democratic centralism that remains true to the spirit, if not the letter, of the popularly known "21 conditions" This form of democracy, as illustrated by Ball and Stagger (2008), purports to mix two incompatible forms of party leadership: "democracy, which allows for freedom of expression and open discussion, and central control, which enforces party unity and discipline. Free discussion within the EPRDF is accordingly tolerated until a decision is made by majority vote. This decision is then adopted as official party line and all

members of the party, including those who voted in the minority, are bound to fully support the party line in public. Discussion of party policy and program usually begins at the politburo level and runs top down. In practice, most of the decisions of the top leadership (the selectorate) are rubber-stamped by lower level organs of the party (Young and Tadesse, 2003).

This institutional culture of discipline, loyalty to party decisions and extreme secrecy helped the Party to triumph during the armed struggle, even under the most adverse of circumstances. Despite public disavowal of its Leninist orientation, the party has carried over this institutional culture from its early days as a guerilla movement to those as a ruling party. The party continues to be organized in the same way, with cell-like structure comprising the smallest unit of organization and the party's general assembly forming its largest. The hierarchy of decision-making remains intact. The EPRDF's Executive Committee, consisting of all politburo members of the coalition's unit parties, is the highest policymaking organ of the party. The decisions of this committee are rarely defied by the lower level organs. This group, then, is the vanguard of "the vanguard party." The slogan "Freedom of discussion, unity of action" remains the Front's fundamental organizational doctrine (Gebreab, 2009).

But there has been a significant shift in one aspect of the organization's decision-making. Prior to the 2001 TPLF split, the EPRDF's selectorate was considered one of the most strong and secure in Africa. Virtually all important decisions were made collectively by the group of leaders; the chairperson of the party was generally regarded as a mere public spokesperson and representative of the party. Collective leadership was taken to its logical extreme during the Ethio-Eritrean war, when most of the prime minister's constitutional powers were severely limited by informal dictums.[16]

During this period, the process of internal deliberations among politburo members remained closely guarded secrets but, due to the number of days these deliberations required on average, it is assumed that they were thorough and occasionally intense. The 2001 split and the success of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in orchestrating the purge of some of the party's most important leaders, gradually led to the emergence of a selectorate dominated by one man. By the 2005 elections, the prime minister had further ruthlessly and effectively removed most supporters of the purged leaders from the party, the army and the security forces, and filled the EPRDF's Executive Committee with his most loyal supporters. Most of these new insiders therefore have no power base within the party, or social base outside of it. Their powers remain very insecure. Weak selectorates often fail to challenge the ruler for fear of consequences, lacking the strength to resist repression attempts, or believe that their power is closely tied with the power of a specific leader (Besley and Kudamatsu, 2008). As the Ethiopian case illustrates, the erosion of power of this

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[16] Interview with Awalom Woldu, former politburo member of TPLF

group not only discharged some of the institutional accountability mechanisms of leadership, but also considerably narrowed the selectorate space.

Narrow or wide, selectorate space rarely involves the media. It is true that Members of the selectorate communicate with each other about "matters they understand to be of public concern and potentially require collective action or recognition" (Benkler, 2006: 178)and these communications are not intended to be self-contained (although group membership is); thus selectorate space may be regarded as part of the public sphere. But the nature and structure of this communication makes the space a unique form of the public sphere, in which the media's share of the sphere is very insignificant. Rather, formal and informal face-to-face meetings are the main form of communication in this space.

In Ethiopia, the traditional role of the media has predominantly been publishing and broadcasting carefully selected videos and footage of selectorate meetings, intended to show the harmonious conduct of deliberations. During the weak selectorate era, some edited videos of the debates appeared on Ethiopian Television (ETV) but these videos chiefly portrayed the prime minister's supreme power of articulacy and knowledge. By contrast, other members of the selectorate have often been seen struggling to grasp and articulate issues, hence cunningly reinforcing the prime minister's overwhelming power dominance within the party.

The online participatory media that developed primarily during the weak selectorate era did not, for the most part, pay enough attention to these deliberations, let alone participate in the space. Oromo and Integrationist clusters dismissed them as unworthy of political notice, and Pro-government websites merely reported the news and decisions of the meetings, without providing details on the specifics of the debates (Megenta, 2007). Informal deliberations among the members of the selectorate were often ignored. But there have been two incidents over the last three years that are worthy of notice.

These stories highlight opportunities that online communications afford members of a weak selectorate to anonymously forward ideas that are otherwise unpalatable in face-to-face meetings with a powerful authoritarian ruler. The first one occurred during the Christmas period one and a half years ago. In late 2008, Birtukan Mideksa, a charismatic 35-year old opposition politician, was arrested for refusing to apologize for a statement she made at a meeting with her supporters in Stockholm. The decision to arrest her was considered controversial even within the ruling party, as she was not only one of the most favorite politicians in the country, but willing to conduct her politics peacefully and legally. Interviews with top EPRDF officials made it clear that the decision was made solely by the prime minister.

On December 30, 2008, Getachew Mequanent, a well-know government supporter, published an article on the pro-government aigaforum.com, calling for the immediate release of Ms. Mideksa. That Aigaforum, a cautious outlet that waits for

the emergence of a government line prior to publishing its articles, was quick to post this passionate critique of the government's significant action was taken as a political statement by party insiders. Getachew Mequanent's article was anonymously emailed to the prime minister from Europe and America. As the email address to which the article was sent was known only to a close circle of the prime minister's confidants, it was immediately evident to him that the email campaign was orchestrated by unhappy members of the selectorate--prompting him to call an urgent meeting of the top leaders to discuss the issue.[17] The meeting was largely dominated by the prime minister's warnings to the insiders, but that is beside the point. The significance of these events lies in the fact that these selectorate members were capable of using an online platform, aided by secret email communications, to ensure that the ruler was aware of their dissent in a decision of prominent importance.

The other relates to the prime minister's public promise to soon leave office. He first announced this promise in September 2005, during an interview with CNN. Since this original statement was uttered at the height of an election-related political crisis in Ethiopia, it was largely interpreted as a crisis-dampening promise that would surely be rescinded once the political impasse was resolved. Yet the prime minister continued to deliver similar statements in subsequent interviews with other international news organizations.[18] As the issue of his resignation had never been discussed by the selectorate, some members of the group were understandably confused. In the summer of 2009, press reports started to suggest that the prime minister would soon present the issue to the executive committee. It was further hinted that he would not leave office alone, but demand the resignation of all 'old guards' within the party. Some of the selectorate members began to oppose his promise of leaving office openly. Others followed suit by sending anonymous letters to aigaforum.com. Some pushed their individual contacts within the Diaspora to write articles (on Aigaforum), asking the prime minister to stay in power and complete the "development projects" he had started. By September 2009, when the EPRDF Executive Committee Meeting was held, a tide of "No Resignation" sentiment had captured the selectorate. Some analysts doubted whether this honest-looking debate was not, in fact, an orchestrated public relations stunt ("I want to leave office, but my comrades do not") intended to bolster Meles Zenawi's 'democratic potential'. Indeed, as Sunstein and Vermeuele (2008) noted, excessively secretive regimes are prone to conspiracy theories that are often grounded in legitimate reasons. Yet from my interviews with EPRDF insiders, I gathered that the prime minister's promise to leave office had truly taken some members of the selectorate by surprise.

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[17] Interview with anonymous official B

[18] http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=ad61j4ItAX9c

These stories reveal the potential of online participatory media to expand the intake of a selectorate space. It can also be argued that they have potential for enhancing accessibility, as members of the selectorate whose speech is normally constrained in face-to-face meetings can air their views using these platforms. Their contribution to other values of the minimum set of criteria is, however, virtually nil. Yet the stories also illustrate the very limited role that online participatory platforms can possibly play in expanding both the accessibility of the selectorate space and its intake. In the first case, it took a certain daring on the part of the editor of a reliably pro-authoritarian government website, a writer willing to criticize his party and a carefully constructed email network to make a dissenting opinion heard. After the prime minister's urgent meeting with the members of the selectorate, however, Aigaforum published a series of articles justifying the decision to arrest Birtukan Mideksa and the controversy died down very quickly. In the second case, one ought to doubt whether the critics would have been given space to speak out had they been demanding the prime minister's resignation rather than his staying in power.

Permitted/Tolerated Space

Until the government began filtering websites in 2006, the status of the participatory media was uncertain. The existing laws were too narrow in scope and technical sophistication to adequately regulate the new media ecosystem and the government made no attempt to draft a new law. Yet there were provisions in the Ethiopian criminal code and press law which could be used to prosecute some publishers, if need be.[19] It is worth nothing that, at least until the last few months of the 2005 elections, the government appeared wholly unconcerned with the cyber media in general, regarding it as an indulgence of very few elites in Ethiopia and a handful of government opponents overseas. This position was not without valid reason. At the beginning of 2005, internet penetration in Ethiopia was less than 0.25 %(ITU, 2006) and 97% (Melkamu, 2009) of the users were within Addis Ababa. Add the painfully slow connection speed, and it could be intuitively assumed that it was a most unlikely tool to threaten government power or be harnessed by the opposition as an effective instrument of mass communication. With an ambiguous legal status and lack of government attention, the participatory media could be said to have been operating in a tolerated space.

It was evident from the outset that online participatory media offered unique advantages that the traditional private and public media do not. First, as the start-up, production and distribution costs of these websites were very low, the constant problems of market survival no longer applied. A part-time publisher could successfully update them daily with a combination of aggregated news and one or two articles from contributors without incurring any financial costs in the process.

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[19] Some online media owners living overseas were prosecuted in absentia in 2006. See:
http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?id=ENGAFR250132006&lang=e

Second, the option of remaining anonymous reduced both the formal (legal) and informal risks of publishing. Third, the transnational character of the platforms allowed them to attract contributions from well-educated Ethiopians among the Diaspora, enhancing the overall quality of their output. Fourth, the distribution of the network architecture of these platforms made them a difficult target of government control.

These advantages gave the participatory media an edge over the traditional media in the representation of diverse views (if strictly within the political spectrum of operation) and the platform expansion that encouraged the participation of a wider segment of the population. The latter part of this statement initially seems counter-intuitive. As I previously noted, one of the reasons that the government did not consider the online media as a powerful tool of mobilization was due to their extremely low readership within Ethiopia. Despite all their problems, the traditional private media had a far greater readership in Ethiopia than the websites. But my view of participation, as outlined in the first section of this paper, is more active than the mere reading of a newspaper. Except in the Letters to the Editors sections, readers of newspapers have no opportunity to express their views on the contents of the newspapers or initiate new discussions. The limited space and format that make the active participation of readers virtually impossible within traditional media are, however, non-existent in online platforms.

This is not to suggest that the number of people potentially exposed to a particular media form is irrelevant when measuring accessibility. Indeed, no student of democracy would consider increased participation in a narrow self-contained group as nothing more than a mere democratization of a private sphere or, more generously, a limited public sphere. But measuring the extent of exposure to the Ethiopian online participatory media based solely on the number of online readers is deceptive. Prior to 2006, a considerable segment of the original online content used to attract wider readership in Ethiopia as it was reproduced by the traditional local print media. In fact, during the months surrounding the 2005 elections, a significant portion of the news, features and opinions published in private newspapers were taken directly from the web (See graph below).

Usage of political resources from Eth. participatory media by newspapers (%) (March-October 2005)
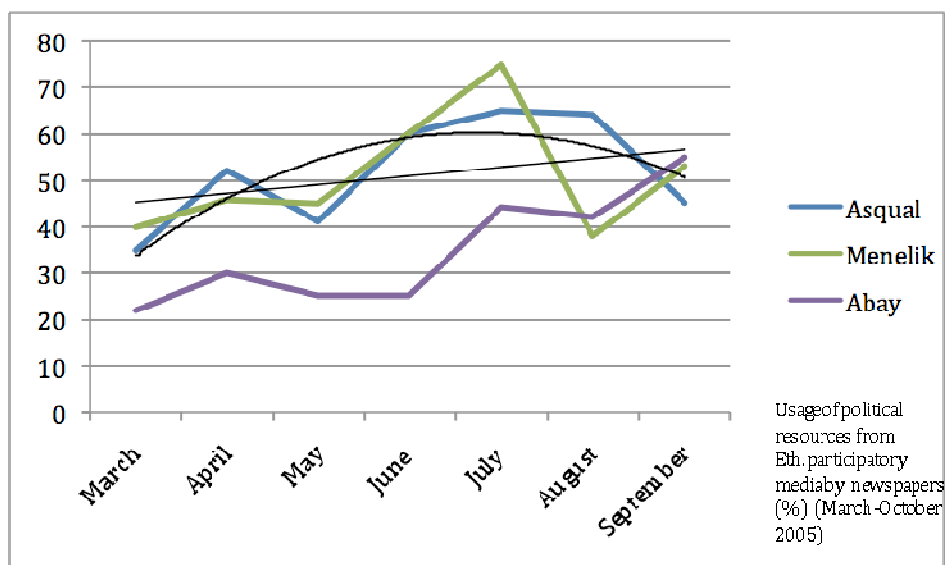
The three newspapers represented on the graph, with a combined weekly circulation of 141, 256 copies per week, were among the top five most widely-read newspapers[20] in Ethiopia in 2005. The primary reason for the sizable mass reproduction of web content was economic. These and other private newspapers, as argued elswehere, were simply unable to form a full-fledged news organization with substantial undertakings of in-house production. They also could not solicit sufficient contributions from outside writers due to the risks associated with writing in newspapers with strong anti-government views. In this context, it appeared that the translation of articles and news from the net was the cheapest and most logical strategy to ensure market survival. It would, however, be a mistake to overlook the political reasons that motivated their actions. In a model of symbiois interaction, the domestic pro-opposition traditional media had also forged strong links with the online platforms published in the Diaspora. [21]

Apart from providing wider access to people inside Ethiopia, the reproduction of their content was instrumental in catapulting some of the platforms to the status of influential discourse setters. It also proves that the government overlooked this indirect influence in its pre-2006 analysis of the online media sphere.

The case of Dagmawi's blog offers a good example. One day after the May 15, 2005 general elections, the EPRDF delcared victory and announced its immediate intentions to form a government. While this victory was broadcast, ballot counting was still underway in at least 312 constitutiencies. The premature declaration of victory combined with reports of widespread discrepancies coming largely from rural areas convinced the opposition parties and most of the Addis Ababa-based

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[20] Ministry of Information newspaper circulation reports(2006)

[21] Interview with Eskinder Nega, proprietor of Asqual, Menelik and Satenaw(2009)

private media that it was a case of "stolen elections." In the first few days, the newspapers were predominantly limited to reporting statements of the opposition parties questioning the election results, and publishing eye-witness accounts of post-election problems. These reports, while instumental in convincing opposition supporters to refuse the election results, did not provide the 'smoking-gun' evidence of election theft. But a week later, the complexity of the reports notably changed following the thorough statistical analysis of Dagmawi, who is popularly known as 'The Blogfather'.

Dagmawi commenced his analysis on May 26, 2005 using data taken from the website of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE). His first article concentrated on the discrepancy between the turnout and winning margins in two demographically and culturally close, as well as geographically adjacent, constituencies. Ethiomedia, one of the most widely read Ethiopian websites, linked the story. It was also discussed in the forum of another popular website and numerous blogs. Outside the online media ecosystem, Meznagna, a private newspaper in Addis Ababa that had also launched its own statistical analysis, published Dagmawi's article. It was later picked up by Asqual newspaper. Dagmawi additionally contributed three successive articles detailing turnout patterns and their implications on the validity of the results. These articles illuminated staggering statistical anomalies that would lead any objective researcher to seriously question the election results. All three articles were published by private newspapers in Ethiopia. By mid-June, these and other statistical analyses by the prominent blogger had thoroughly discredited the validity of the results. Political writers and party leaders used these same articles to demand either election re-runs or the formation of a unity government.

Dagmawi's role in the story was both reactive and generative. He reacted to what appeared to be a most egregious abuse of electoral process. But he was not limited solely to the condemnation of this abuse. He systematically investigated the problem and extracted incontestable, credible proof that the abuse occurred. The first lesson of Dagmawi's story is thus that, even in a state with low connectivity, online media can still play a significant reactive and generative role by partnering with the traditional media. Without the internet, it would be difficult to imagine writers like Dagmawi with any public voice, let alone significant weight, in the whole post-election saga. There could hardly be a better example of expanding intake basin in permitted/tolerated space.

But the effect is not exclusively restricted to intake. Unlike other articles that had previously passed without notice, Dagmawi's articles became popular because many other websites selected and linked them. This, then, is a genuine case of filtering for accreditation and relevance. The articles were considered worthy of sharing and circulating in direct response to their credibility. This filtering process is in some ways identical to similar processes within the old media. The articles gained visibility because other members of the online media community deemed them credible and relevant (with due regard to the distinction between the two concepts) and linked them. But it also differs from that of old media methods in some aspects. The process of linking the articles--helping readers to directly reference them and discern their content--was a much more chaotic, but democratic, way of filtering both for accreditation and relevance. If enough participants of the high-visibility sites that linked the articles criticized these articles, they would have lost the credibility gained through approval by the website editors. This is a case of "rebuttable credibility and relevance." The editors have the power of filtering but it remains open to challenge.

Compare that to the filtering process of the same story within the traditional media: Editors of the newspapers picked up the analyses, inserted them into their features and news sections and published them. The filtering processes were completed once the newspapers were published. The editors of the papers had the final say; they determined the significance of particular political information based on their knowledge. It is this role of absolute guardianship that has been removed by the participatory aspect of the online media. In authoritarian countries, independent traditional journalists usually act in what Daniel Hallin (1986) termed "spheres of deviance" but within these spheres, there used to be a strong authority to define and limit the scope of legitimate debate. This authority eroded through participatory media.
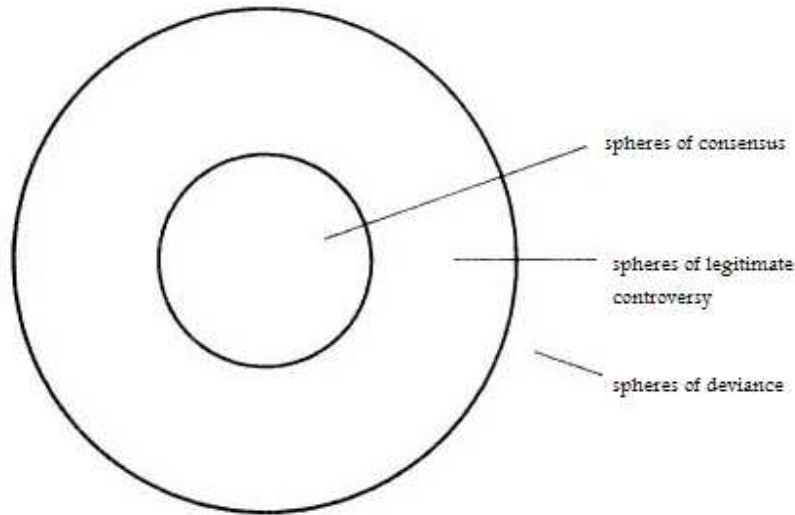
The "Uncensored War"

Diagram of public sphere   Source: The "Uncensored War" (1986)

My second case focuses on how these intake and filtering processes lead to mobilization for political action within the same platforms. In their mobilization capacity, the online media transform from a sphere of information exchange into active tools of organization and action. This role remains controversial. Most members of the media consider it their function to act as conduits of objective information (the "view from nowhere", as Thomas Nagel (1973) puts it) to the public (Shudson, 1978; Kaplan, 2002; Mindich, 1998). But this view has been called into question by several scholars and media theorists. Some of these critics focus on what is (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). They argue that, despite the claims of journalists, the empirical evidence shows that they can never be truly objective. Others concentrate on what ought to be, criticizing the values of objectivity as presented and occasionally practiced by journalists (Merrit, 1998).

Many journalists within Ethiopia consider these debates irrelevant. Translated into academic language, their critique of the standards of objectivity is primarily related to what John Dewey (1927) identified as "the problem of the public." In authoritarian countries, the argument goes, the public of theory is very different from the public of reality. The public of reality is either disorganized or makes choices contrary to its theoretically rational interest because of state instigated fear and paranoia. It is fragmented and fragile. Under these circumstances, the task of the media ought to include not only informing the public, but also creating it

(Mekkonen, 2005). This Deweyan view has remained the predominant philosophy of the majority of the independent traditional media since 1991, and the online media followed suit with little discussion and debate. Online activism became an integral part of journalism. This next case is an example of journalism as activism.

On October 28, 2005, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), the largest opposition group in Ethiopia at the time, openly called for widespread civil disobedience actions to protest the election results. The call included, among other things, acts of non-cooperation in the form of boycotting business organizations owned by the ruling party and ostracizing people who informed on political activists in their neighborhoods.[22] On November 1 and 2, most of the top party leaders were incarcerated and newspapers shut down. With their leaders in jail and information-obtaining mechanisms cut off, supporters of the party at home and overseas could no longer coordinate their actions. Elias Kifle of Ethiopian Review took note and stepped into the arena of political coordination.

In the website forum, a variety of action items--such as boycotting Ethiopian Airlines, ceasing money transfers and helping prisoners' families--were discussed by forum members. Elias himself led the discussion, posting suggestions on the website's homepage. Some of the proposed action items were rejected following deliberations; others were adopted by forum members. In early 2006, Elias intensified his efforts by orchestrating the creation of an action group appropriately named Tegba*r* (action), using the website as a tool. Tegbar began organizing student protests in Addis Ababa and forging networks in some places outside the city. Ethiopian Review also played a leading role in soliciting funds for the organization.

Many of the actions by Tegbar and other groups mobilized by Ethiopian Review were not considered highly successful. Yet it hardly enriches our understanding of the online media if we pin these failures exclusively on factors beyond media control (such as the strength of the adversary). Indeed, one lesson to be learned from this story is that some elements of the participatory media can potentially grow too large, wielding inordinate power. Observation of the Ethiopian online ecosystem reveals a gradual congregation of users to a very small number of sites. Yearly traffic ranking of Ethiopian websites compiled by Ethiopia Media Association International (EMAI) display this growing centralization of the online sphere. [23]

As one of the most comprehensive political websites, Ethiopian Review also provides directories of churches, restaurants and numerous other organizations relevant to the daily lives of Ethiopians living in North America in addition to

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[22] See:
http://nazret.com/blog/index.php?title=cud_ban_on_eprdf_owned_businesses&more=1&c=1&tb=1&pb=1, accessed 25-11-2009

[23] See: http://addispress.wordpress.com/2009/12/24/ethiopias-top-25-most-popular-media-of-2009/, accessed 21-10-1009

hosting comprehensive news aggregation, a web information bank and one of the most robust Ethiopian discussion forums. Unsurprisingly, this website has greatly benefited from this congregation of users. According to alexa.com, it is the most widely read online Ethiopian media by a considerable margin, and the figures remain steady even during the website's off season. Ethiopian Review also benefited from the long and checkered history of the Ethiopian Review brand as well as from readers' interest in the radical, and often frankly articulated, political positions of its editor.

In discussing Ethiopian Review's online political mobilization effort, it is important to note that it was, in fact, a "go-it-alone" project. The editor lambasted other online media organizations for their lack of action, but did little to solicit support for his own efforts or to coordinate those of others. In fact, he often quarreled with other activist and political support groups, berating them in his popular website. This is a case of concentration of power in participatory media. It challenges the assertion that the internet is too decentralized, and thus inherently democratic. While the process of deliberation and information exchange (including intake, filtering, synthesis and filtering) within the specific media platform might be democratic, that does not guarantee that the overall online discourse and action is also so.

Underground Space

In recent political science literature, "ungoverned space" is used increasingly synonymously with "failed states", which are "unable to effectively exercise their [internal] sovereignty" (Trunan and Trinkuans, 2010: 1). Ken Menkhaus(2007) defined the term as "a general condition of weak to nonexistent state authority in a defined geographic area"(2007:3) Theresa Whelan(2005) makes the distinction between physical ungoverned spaces – "those hinterlands beyond the effective reach of a weak state" – and "non-physical" ungoverned spaces, "domains within a state where the government is unable or unwilling to exercise authority." These spaces are often cited as security threats to Western interests--sanctuaries of Islamic terrorists, pirates, proliferators of WMD, and narco-traffickers (Trunan and Trinkunas, 2010). The discussion of the concept of ungoverned space as solely an international security issue not only distracts attention from the value of these spaces within authoritarian countries, but also creates a hostile international attitude to media and groups who operate primarily in these spaces, owing to the closure of permitted/tolerated spaces.

In the past few years, the Ethiopian government has been a great beneficiary of this conceptualization. Dangers of terrorism and piracy in the Horn of Africa have frequently led powerful Western governments to assist the Ethiopian government in bolstering its ability to effectively govern what were previously ungoverned spaces,

the 'collateral-damage' being the stifling of underground spaces for pro-democracy groups (Prendergast and Thomas-Jensen, 2007). After all independent newspapers were shut down in Ethiopia in November 2005, for example, attempts to start underground political publications in Addis Ababa and other cities were easily quashed.

By removing what was once a purely physical/geographical aspect of "ungoverned space", the online media has, however, dramatically changed these circumstances. The control of physical space – such as the capture of national radio and television stations, the dismantling of underground printing infrastructures and the physical disablement of producers and distributors – has become insufficient to stop an underground media. Filtering and censoring of websites decreases, not totally obliterates, this space.

The following case, linked to seminawork.blogspot.com, provides evidence of the difficulty in fully controlling underground space in Ethiopia, despite the government's enhanced security infrastructure. Seminawork was created by a European-trained Ethiopian lawyer in February 2006. The blogger, who goes by the alias Ethio Zagol, became instantly popular by publishing secret government information. On Thursday October 2007, this blogger broke the story that Yalemzewd Bekele, a prominent human rights lawyer working for the European Commission in Addis Ababa, was arrested by the Ethiopian government. The event reportedly occurred as she attempted to cross the Kenyan border upon learning that she was sought by Ethiopian police in connection to her involvement in underground political activism. It was further mentioned that two European diplomats who tried to help her escape were concurrently expelled from the country. The story received international attention almost immediately, with the BBC, Reuters, AP and the Economist extending coverage. The blogger then proceeded to uncover the complete saga, including the arrest of a well-known local businessman in connection to the same charges, and the government's espionage infrastructure within the EC's Addis Ababa office.

One day after the news was broken, a commenter on the blog posted the email address and telephone number of Louis Michel, then EU's Development Commissioner, and urged other participants of the blog to demand that he pressure the Ethiopian government for Yalemzewd's release. Other readers came up with different plans, including writing to Amnesty International, sending letters to the editors of major international newspapers and holding candle light vigils in front of the White House. Some of these proposals were followed through. On Saturday, three days after her arrest, Yalemzewd was released from jail. Her release was a triumph for both the blogger and the blog participants. But they didn't stop there; reports of other people arrested in the same case were also publicized. In some cases, these arrestees were severely tortured in the notorious Woreda 8 prison. The blog participants' attention shifted to campaigning for the immediate closure of this jail. When international human rights defenders joined the campaign, the Ethiopian government quietly released all the prisoners and closed the prison.

Seminawork was also involved in other highly publicized cases of political mobilization. Most of these campaigns followed the same pattern. The blogger would publish information, and then commenters discuss the issues directly on the site and in various other forums. Suggestions for action would be made; if enough people approved of the suggestions, they would then be followed by action. Most of the actions were limited to online petitions and phone calls--effective in some cases, entirely useless in others. The process, however, involved most of the important elements of a robust public platform: relatively strong intake base, filtering (for both accreditation and relevance) and synthesis.

What makes Seminawork's role more interesting is the fact that the blog was run from inside Ethiopia for the duration of these campaigns. It is not for lack of investigation that the blogger was not caught; security forces repeatedly tried to track his whereabouts, but were unsuccessful. In fact, Ethio Zagol publicized some of these attempts in the blog, seemingly playing, in some instances, a reckless game of "catch-me-if-you-can". The question is whether the blogger would have managed to successfully hoodwink government monitors had they not been well connected. This is not only a rhetorical question. The answer would provide some sense of the extent to which new media platforms frustrate government control of non-physical ungoverned spaces.

The experience of another underground blogger portrays a different image. In 2005, Nathalie Margiotta, a former French resident in Addis Ababa, started political blogging on the Ethiopian blog platform nazret.com. Calling herself Addis Ferenj, Mrs. Margiotta routinely reported major post-election political incidents in Addis Ababa. When all independent newspapers were shut down in November 2005, Addis Ferenj's blog became one of the most important platforms of original reporting. Mrs. Margiotta published detailed accounts of student protests, economic conditions within the capital and, more importantly, was able to obtain information about the deteriorating relationship between the government and Ethiopia's donors due to her strong links to the donor community in Addis Ababa. Addis Ferenj was able to evade internet surveillance and conceal her identity for months. In March 2006, the government followed different clues (including a petition signed online by a French resident in Addis Ababa, donor community networks and IP addresses) to finally identify the blogger and deport her from Ethiopia.

Like many repressive regimes, the Ethiopian government is growing increasingly savvy in surveillance and monitoring techniques, amply demonstrating Gary Rodan's observation in the earliest days of the internet that:

> When the political will to obstruct certain information
> and views is coupled with such variables as an efficient
> and technically competent bureaucracy, an established
> regime of political intimidation and surveillance, and
> embedded corporatist structures facilitating
> cooperation between state officials and administrators

across the public and private sectors, you have a formidable mix."[24]

In some instances, this formidable mix has been successful in flushing out or deterring home bloggers; in others, the bloggers have been agile enough to heed timely warnings and remain one step ahead of the government. Urael, another underground blogger in Ethiopia, used simple techniques like using proxy servers, blogging from crowded internet cafes and deleting private data when finished for the purposes of securing communication. Ethio Zagol used codes in email communications and chat rooms of least monitored sites for information exchange, and saved and shared information via a shared email account. These techniques alone do not make communications fully secure. But they dramatically reduce the probability of success for those who monitor the web. When a given technique becomes less safe, members of the participatory media can quickly shift to other methods. In the words of Patrick Meier, "unlike the hierarchical, centralized structures of repressive regimes, networks have more flexibility and feedback loops, which make them more adaptable" (Meier, 2009)

Another potential challenge to the claim that underground participatory media can expand participatory space in authoritarian regimes is what I term "The Problem of Contamination". The problem of contamination arises when independent media in both underground and permitted/tolerated spaces, and language, content and ethics of discourse of underground space diffuse to permitted/tolerated space. Participants in underground media are generally more radical in political position, less limited in the usage of offensive vocabularies and less interested to search for compromises and settlements. Yet discussing the cause for these differences in the nature of discourse is not my present aim. What I intend, rather, to show is the risk of the blurring of this difference in the size of a public sphere. I will start by offering another story to highlight the problem.

Awramba Times is a pro-opposition newspaper established by prominent journalist Dawit Kebede following his release from jail in August 2007. The contents first few edition of the newspaper were mainly produced in-house. However, this independence hasn't lasted for more than a few weeks. Awramba Times' reliance on information from Ethiopian participatory media, which have primarily operated in underground spaces since 2006, dramatically increased after April 2007. It published features and commentaries posted on sites like ethiopianreview.com and ethioforum.org. Although the editors carefully avoided the use of vocabularies that are considered by the government to be particularly inflammatory, the tone and character of the majority of the newspaper articles began to resemble that of the online media. With the increase in radical rhetoric, Awramba's legal and political

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[24] Quoted in http://irevolution.wordpress.com/2009/11/19/dictators-love-web/

troubles with the ruling party also increased. In April 2010, Awramba's editor-in-chief resigned and left the country in the wake of constant government harassment.

It is arguable whether a newspaper like Awramba Times would be free of such difficulties in today's Ethiopia. It is worth noting that another newspaper, which avoided publishing online commentators, was also forced to close down by the government.[25] Nonetheless, there is no doubt that infiltration of underground discourse in the media operating in the permitted/tolerated space will certainly increase the troubles of the same, making it more likely for actions by the government to narrow down the permitted/tolerated space.

In summary, Ethiopia's underground political participatory media have expanded the ungoverned space for democratic participation . This space will grow further when the internet penetration rate, slowly but surely, also grows. This is not to say that there are no remaining challenges. The government continues to sharpen its tactics of internet repression and members of the participatory media ought to adapt to this reality. Yet, unlike traditional media, the online media's network architecture and economy offer significant asymmetrical warfare advantages to triumph over these techniques.

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[25] Addis Neger was forced to shut down in December 2009. See:
http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/greenslade/2009/dec/07/press-freedom-ethiopia

Conclusion

That the internet is changing power dynamics in authoritarian states is understood. Less known is how and in whose favor this change of dynamics is occurring. This paper is an attempt to understand and explain this change in Ethiopia, an authoritarian state that is variously referred to as "competitive authoritarian", "semi-authoritarian", "electoral dictatorship", and "contractual authoritarian" by different writers. It did so in two steps. The first was to develop a theoretical framework to understand the relationship between democracy and the internet. Second, based on case studies and in-depth observation, it examined the impact of Ethiopia's online media in expanding participation with the view of matching theory to practice.

My theoretical framework is, though not novel, rather unorthodox. It rejects the use of an aggregative concept of democracy to evaluate the internet's democratization effect. The more reliable evaluative, if difficult, concept for the internet's democratization potential is maximalist democracy; this is consistent with the internet's architecture and economy. My next task was to develop criteria for measuring the democratization of PPPs in three authoritarian spaces: namely, selectorate space, permitted/tolerated space and underground space. PPPs may come in different forms. This paper singled out one part of this ecology-- participatory media.

In light of the very low internet penetration rate and the government's active attempts to filter and monitor the internet, Ethiopia's participatory media are robust, if divided along deeply entrenched political lines. Within those sharp default lines, the case studies and analyses illuminate the participatory media's role in enhancing accessibility, expanding intake basin and improving filtering for political relevance and accreditation, as well as synthesis in all authoritarian spaces of participation. This is not to say that they are not without challenges. Indeed, some of these problems, such as congregative dominance and contamination effect, have negatively impacted the size of participatory space. But, on balance, the evidence suggests a clear case of participatory media opening up alternative spaces of participation in an authoritarian state.

Although participatory media poses deep problems for the Ethiopian government, it does not imply that the government is doing little to address the challenge. Yet the option it has so far selected to counter the problem (i.e., based on the Cuban model of internet growth) is forcing it to also forego the economic benefits of connectivity. This suggests that the theory of "dictator's dilemma", in its prudently formulated form, is very real--at least for one regime.

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