

**Global Media Journal  
African Edition  
2013 Vol 7(2):140-171**

**THE ROLE OF THE PRIVATE PRINT MEDIA IN POST-SOCIALIST ETHIOPIA  
VIEWS FROM GOVERNMENT, OPPOSITION POLITICIANS, ACADEMICS AND  
THE PRIVATE PRESS**

*Melisew Dejene*

**ABSTRACT**

*Recounting the views of the government, opposition politicians, academics and the private press itself as represented by their editors, the study argues that the private print media in Ethiopia are subject to external and internal challenges that dwarf its role in helping the transition to democracy. The volatility of the socio-political context regarding their operation and the low readership culture could be singled out among the external challenges to the private media. The major challenge associated with the private print media themselves is lack of professional knowledge and capacity. The study uses McQuail's Normative Theory of Media Structure and Performance to frame the role of the private print media in Ethiopia of the last two decades. Though the private print media contributed to the struggle for democracy, their role is below the societal demands.*

**Keywords:** *The private print media, McQuail's normative theory of media structure and performance, post-socialist Ethiopia, democracy*

## **I. Introduction**

The media landscape in Ethiopia has gone through some changes since 1991. The number of newspapers which was few (the national dailies: *Addis Zemen* (Amharic) and *Ethiopian Herald* (English) along with the party organ *Serto Ader* (Amharic), during the demise of the military regime, were supplemented by a handful of private print media outlets immediately after the downfall of the military regime.

The time between 1991 and 1992 could be said to be one of the freest times in the history of the Ethiopian private press as there was no need to formally register in order to own and run a newspaper or a magazine (PMC, 2006). This trend, however, was short lived as proclamation 34/92 came into effect with requirements for pre-publication registration and licensing formalities for the private press. This period witnessed several papers and magazines produced by some who were simply zealous to do journalism and some who had a cause, and a few others who wanted to earn a living out of newspaper publishing. For instance, privately owned magazines and newspapers like *'Tsedey, Hibir, Tobiya, Iyita, Addis Dimts, Addis Tribune (English)* were all started in 1991 (Shimelis, 2000).

The promulgation of the transitional charter Press Proclamation 34/1992 could be seen as a land mark in the Ethiopian media landscape as it attempted to establish a formal setting for the operations of the media acknowledging private actors, which was unprecedented in the history of the Ethiopian media with the exception of Emperor Haile Sellasie's provision in 1937 "to establish a private press for the publication of books and newspapers" which was revoked by the Italian occupation (Shimelis, 2000, p.15).

The private print media landscape, however, was found to be volatile. The number of Newspapers and Magazines in print was 180 (134 newspapers and 46 magazines in 2004/05 (Birhanu, 2006)). The number went down to 56 (25 newspapers and 31 magazines) as of June, 2012 (EBA, 2012). This figure dropped again to only 39 (16 newspapers and 23 Magazines) as of March 2013 (EBA, 2013).

Newspaper circulation in Ethiopia has not been encouraging. A glance at the circulation of four private newspapers with the highest circulation as of December 2011 may reveal that reality.

**Table 1**

*Circulation of Some of the Private Newspapers by 2011*

<b>Name of Newspaper</b>	<b>Circulation (as of December 2011)</b>	<b>Remarks</b>
<i>Feteh</i> (Amharic weekly)	17,500	Now defunct
<i>Addis Admas</i> (Amharic Weekly)	15,100	
<i>Reporter</i> (bi-weekly) Amharic version	11,750	
<i>Fortune</i> (English weekly)	7,750	An English weekly with the highest circulation as of that date

*Note.* Adapted from the *Ethiopian Broadcast Authority Quarterly Newsletter*, 1 (9).

The trend in the circulation of private newspapers is in a downturn as shown by recent statistics of the Ethiopian Broadcast Authority.

**Table 2**

*Circulation of Some of the Private Newspapers by 2013*

<b>Name of Newspaper</b>	<b>Circulation (as of March 2013)</b>	<b>Remarks</b>
<i>Reporter</i> (bi-weekly) Amharic version	10,500	Sunday Edition
<i>Addis Admas</i>	8,900	
<i>Fortune</i>	7,250	An English weekly with the highest circulation as of that date

*Note.* Adapted from the *Ethiopian Broadcast Authority Quarterly Newsletter*, 1 (14), pp 19-20.

It should be noted that the adult literacy rate is estimated at 36% (50% adult Male and 77% female are reported to be illiterate) (MOE, 2010), in to account. However, the private press has been still considered as an alternative voice for those who wanted a different frame from the official line, the broadcast media and the National Dailies (*Addis Zemen* and *The Ethiopian Herald*) being controlled by the government. From 2005 and onwards, however, the Ethiopian Broadcast Authority (EBA) granted licenses to a few private FM radio stations based in the Capital Addis Ababa.

Most of the journalists in Ethiopia are employed by the government-owned media. The biggest government media organization in Ethiopia, Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency (ERTA) employs about 2000 personnel (Personal communication, September 22, 2013). This figure includes administration staff and those working at a technical level in all the relay stations of the organization situated in different parts of the country. The two national dailies that are published by the government-owned Ethiopian Press Agency, *Addis Zemen* and *The Ethiopian Herald* together employ 105 to 115 journalists. The government-owned Ethiopian News Agency employs 268 staff (Nebiyu, 2008, p. 19)

The relationship between the government and the private press in Ethiopia has been difficult since the private press' inception during the transition period (1991-92). There have been many

cases that have taken journalists from the private press to courtrooms. Top government officials denounce the role of the private press as politics-driven and partisan. Some government officials extended their argument to label the private press as "party organs."

The private press, on the other hand, condemns the government for lack of access to government held information. According to the U.S. Department of State 2006 Report, it is only twice that journalists from the private press have had the chance to attend the late Prime Minister Meles's Press conferences in the 14 years since 1991. The government states that it allows access to those private print media that are responsible and that the lack of responsibility of most of the private press is the main reason for denial of access. Denial of access is one form of censorship (Luow, 2005).

## **II. Statement of the Problem**

Ethiopia got the private press only in 1991, under the present government (the EPRDF regime). The military government, the Dergue, monopolized the media so as to propagate its Marxist-Leninist ideology and the private press came into existence in 1991 following its downfall. The short-lived experience of the private print media, however, is full of adversarial relations with the government, where one accuses the other regarding the situation.

Like the private press, journalism education is also a recent development in Ethiopia. "Ethiopia got the first permanent journalism school in 1996 when ... EMMTI [Ethiopian Mass Media Training Institute] (Formerly known as MMTI and MMTC) established its Diploma Programme" – though there were short-term training undertakings in journalism by different organizations during the Haileselesie and the military regimes (Skjerdal, 2011, p. 31). EMMTI has now become part of the undergraduate School of Journalism & Communication of Addis Ababa University.

Currently, many of the well established government universities, even the new ones like Madawalabu University and a couple of the private higher institutions, offer Journalism at an undergraduate degree level. The graduate programme in Journalism was launched at Addis Ababa University in 2004. "... until very recently, journalist's professional competence has been identified as limited or unsatisfactory" (PMC, 2006, p. 51). Hence, earlier those who practise journalism in Ethiopia both in private and government-owned media were not exposed to proper professional training.

Of the 92 journalists working for the media in Ethiopia (both government and private), who were surveyed by one study, only 32.6% studied journalism of which only 6.5% graduated in print journalism. While 47.8 % of them were from Languages & Literature, the rest 13.1 % were from Agriculture, Business, Natural and Social Sciences related disciplines (Birhanu, 2006, p. 81).

In terms of capacity and professionalism, the private press in Ethiopia is at its embryonic stage. Its capacity to recruit journalism graduates is limited. The private newspapers in Ethiopia were able to recruit as few as 4 people in total (e.g. *The Sun* – English weekly now defunct) and 16 people (*Beza* now defunct) including secretaries and sales persons (Shimelis, 2000, Appendix IV). Professionals who graduate from journalism programmes recently are mostly employed by the government media.

One of the conditions for a democracy to sustain itself and thrive is a free and vibrant media equipped with professional ethics and expertise. Journalism is seen as a handmaiden to democracy. The idea of the fourth estate i.e. as a check and balance for the three branches of government- the legislature, the judiciary and the executive- posits journalism as a necessity to sustain democracy.

The private press, however, has been regarded as an alternative voice for the last two decades, and this study is an attempt to answer the question: how has the private press served Ethiopian democracy in its embryonic stage? What is the role of the private press in the struggle for democracy as perceived by politicians, academics and the private press themselves as represented by their editors?

For a country like Ethiopia that emerged from a military-led dictatorship (1974-1991), preparing for democracy to grow could be an uphill struggle. Building democracy needs the establishment of institutions like a free press, independent electoral institutions and an active civil society. Moreover, the judiciary and the legislative bodies need a check and balance mechanism to monitor their effectiveness, hence the need for well-informed media and consequently professional journalism if democracy is to grow and be sustained.

### **III. Journalism and Democracy**

In an attempt to answer why we need to study democracy and understand its implications for journalism, Stromback (2005) argues that the relation between democracy and journalism is best explainable by a "*social contract*" (p. 322). He goes on to say "media and journalism require democracy as it is the only form of government that respects freedom of speech, expression and information, and the independence of media from the state" (p. 322). As journalism needs democracy to be safe-guarded, democracy also needs journalism to be nourished and thrive. As for Stromback (2005), there is no journalism without democracy; without it, it is propaganda. Carey (1999 quoted in *ibid*), also categorically contends, "[w]ithout journalism there is no democracy, but without democracy there is no journalism either" (p. 322).

The archetype of freedom of expression in a democratic context implies three main points: the right to express via any medium (print, broadcast etc.), the right to get and impart information of

any kind, and the presence of independent media free from any interference (Ronning, 2007). These three points are interrelated. The absence of one of them affects the others and consequently the democratic posture. The right to access determines what content to present; this, consequently, affects the framing of the news or information to be presented (Colby, 2005). If the access to information is blocked, the implication is that the communication platform is not free to function independently. The tenets of democracy are counter to this conception. Freedom to inform, to criticize and to interrogate the government is the right of the media in a democracy. It is a strong belief among scholars that it is only a democratic form of government that entitles the media with all their privileges to serve the public interest. Suffice it to say, the press is one of the institutions that is a cornerstone of a successful transition to democracy. How does the private press in Ethiopia look in relation to helping the struggle for democracy?

#### **IV. The Press and Transition to Democracy**

There is an assumption, argues (Nwanko, 2000), "...that communication is often the lightning rod for human conflicts and a catalyst for human social change" (p. 8). Africa is witnessing few consolidated democracies and a few budding democracies these days. Hence one asks what is the contribution of the media in these transitional processes? Hoping to address this question and to reflect on the contributions of the private-print media in Ethiopia, an attempt is made to review relevant literature.

#### **V. The Private-Print Media in Ethiopia**

Ethiopia, one of the biggest countries in Eastern Africa (its population estimated to be over 80 million), has a short-lived history of a private press even compared to most of its African counterparts. Both the imperial regime of Haile Sellasie and the military regime, the Dergue, restricted the operations of the private press though their constitutions at least in principle



respected freedom of expression (Shimelis, 2000). The downfall of the military regime in 1991 created an opportunity for the private press to come into existence. The private newspapers are believed to have voiced alternative views for the past two decades, as the two national dailies: *Addis Zemen* (Amharic) and the *Ethiopian Herald* (English) as well as the electronic media (Ethiopian Television and Radio) have been controlled by the Government. The military regime, the Dergue, with its "Ethiopia First" discourse left no room for freedom of the press and freedom of expression in practice. Hence, the "emerging private papers possessed a great potential to give expression to the hitherto "unheard voices from below," though they faced many internal and external challenges. The external challenges among others included pressure from the government, getting access to information from government officials, a low reading culture (the market), cost of publication and distribution, and pressure from the wholesale distributors. Moreover, lack of technical and professional expertise, financial instability, and ethical problems are associated within the private print media themselves (Shimelis, 2006, p. 187).

Though they are considered as an elite media (primarily used by the educated section of society especially catering for the urban population and mainly the Capital Addis Ababa), the private-print media with all their handicaps (educational, professional, cultural, legal, political etc.) are believed to play a positive role by informing society. The print media have focused on diverse topics ranging from the social, economic, cultural, and political up to entertainment and sports (Article 19, 2003). The challenge, however, is the low professionalism exhibited in most of the private print media.

The number of print media outlets, based on the information by the Ministry of Information, was reported to be 205 between July 2001 and July 2002 (Article 19, 2003). The time before the 2005 election was momentous in the short history of the private newspapers (ibid). However,

some private newspapers were banned and some journalists were detained in relation to the 2005 unrest (Gebremedhin, 2006; IPI, 2005).

There is no published academic study of the Ethiopian context with reference to newspaper circulation except the periodic information on circulation previously published by the Ministry of Information and now published by the Ethiopian Broadcast Authority. However, the low reading culture, economic problems, socio-political sensitiveness, and the lack of professional expertise of most journalists, together with the low literacy rate are among the challenges for the print media.

## **VI. Journalists and Professionalism in Ethiopia**

The majority of journalists both in the government and private media do not have formal journalism training (Lulit, 2003; Shimelis, 2006; Tsega, & Abebe, 2000). The main reason, as discussed earlier is, the absence of schools of journalism in the country until the late 1990s. Hence, those doing journalism have been students of Language and Literature who took some journalism courses, those who are foreign educated (Lulit, 2003) those who have political and economic motivations (Shimelis, 2006), those from other disciplines (Birhanu, 2006) or those with zeal.

The concept the media practitioners in Ethiopia have about themselves and their profession is not yet well-developed. As democracy is at its "experimental stage," journalism as a profession handled by professionals is a recent phenomenon and "the journalist is a suspect" (Shimelis, 2006, p. 196).

The limitations in the operations of the private print media, therefore, can be partly attributed to lack of professional knowledge. The Ethiopian private press is blamed for bias in reporting the

government and the leading party mostly in negative terms (Shimelis, 2000; Hailemarkos, 2006, p. 19).

Research conducted on two private newspapers and two other government-owned ones to evaluate their coverage of political parties during the 2005 election revealed that the two private newspapers (*Ethiop*-now defunct, and *Addis Admas*) allotted much of their space for allegation by the opposition against the ruling party-100% by *Ethiop* and 76% by *Addis Admas*. Such action was replicated by the government English daily, *The Ethiopian Herald* that put 100% of the blame on the opposition (Hailemarkos, 2006, pp. 23-24).

A more recent study on the private print media in Ethiopia arrived at a pessimistic conclusion, questioning their role and casting doubt on their capacity in helping the transition to democracy, describing them as politically motivated (Skjerdal, & Hallelijah, 2009). Viewing them as partisans of the opposition, the Ethiopian government responded to the deeds of the private press in different terms ranging from denying access to government held information to imprisonment of journalists and owners (Skjerdal, & Hailelujah, 2009, p. 52).

## **VII. The Conceptual Framework and Research Methodology**

This study is a qualitative study based on an in-depth one-to-one interview. In an attempt to balance the views regarding the role of the private print media in Ethiopia, the informants are approached in a way varied voices could be entertained. Hence, two of the informants are government higher officials (one MP and one Head of Press Liscensing Section from the then Ministry of Information), two are representatives from opposition parties, two are editors from the private print media and three are academics. The study employs McQuail's Normative Theory of Media Structure and Performance assessment so as to substantiate its arguments

## **VIII. McQuail's Normative Theory of Media Structure and Performance Assessment**

The normative theory of media performance assessment by Denis McQuail (1991) is based mainly on "(1) evidence at the level of media organizations, (2) evidence at the content level, and (3) evidence at the societal level" (as cited in M'Bayo, 2000, p. 26). The focus of this study is mainly on the societal level as it is dealing with what roles, if any, the private print media in Ethiopia have played in transforming the post-socialist Ethiopia and in the transition to democracy. Accordingly the viability of the socio-political context and the government-press nexus will be studied. To that end, the study has confined itself to the societal level, dealing with the private print media as a whole as perceived by government officials, opposition party leaders, academics and researchers in the area of journalism and by editors of the private print media themselves.

Specifically McQuail (1991; 1996; 2006) analysed the 'freedom principle', the 'equality principle' and the 'social order' principle, of which the first two are of main concern here.

The *freedom principle* is concerned with both the structure and performance of the media. The structural premises of freedom include independence, access and diversity of content. This, consequently, will lead to values revealed in the performance of the media. These include: "reliability; critical stance; originality" (McQuail, 2006, p. 195). These values seem to emanate from the aforementioned structural conditions - suffice it to say independence and access. The assumption is that if media are independent and have access to various information channels, they can be dependable. Moreover, they can criticize the power holders on issues of concern. The idea of diversity, which is beyond the scope of this study and best studied at content level, mainly enables the public to choose from varied sources and derive relevance from what the media offers.

The other principle of concern for this study is the principle of *equality*. It is the result of the freedom principle. This principle addresses whether the media treat everyone including high officials in fairness (McQuail, 2006). According to Glasser (1984), the equality principle focuses on issues such as whether the media have open and proportional access to every segment of the public. It also addresses diversity and objectivity issues (as cited in McQuail, 1991). Diversity implies access for minority groups and the voiceless - women for instance. It is the immediate result of freedom (as cited in McQuail, 2006). "Diversity in what media have to offer is also clearly a direct benefit to audiences and can be a reflection of a wide range of access to channels of publication" (McQuail, 2006, p. 197). The other component of the equality principle is 'objectivity' that again is evaluated on the grounds of neutrality; fairness and truth (McQuail, 2006). This normative theory of media performance assessment is concerned with studying the contribution of media over a period of time rather other than with regard to a certain specific incident (McQuail, 1991). As the study is an attempt to document the role of the private print media during the past two decades, this theory is found to be convenient.

## **IX. Discussion**

Regarding the views of government officials, opposition party representatives, academia and the private print media themselves, the study has the following specific objectives:

- Investigate the role the private print media have played in the past two decades (1991 onwards).
- Examine the government-private print media nexus.
- Identify major challenges to the private print media and the possible remedies.
- Assess the state of the private print media vis-à-vis the legal framework.

- Investigate the status of the private print media with respect to journalistic responsibility.

## **X. Views on the Private Print Media in Ethiopia and their Role since Inception**

As mentioned at the outset, journalism is a very young phenomenon in Ethiopia. Journalists in Ethiopia are those with instrumental goals (financial or political motivations) (Shimelis, 2006; Skjerdal, & Hallelujah, 2009), and those who are graduates in Language and Literature (Lulit, 2003) some even having an educational background in natural or agricultural sciences (Birhanu, 2006) or those with zeal. Ethiopian journalists working either for government or private media are noted as commentators rather than reporters.

The sociopolitical context in Ethiopia (attributed to limited freedom of expression), and the culture of secrecy in information delivery (Getahun, 2005) made the media houses and journalists shy away from serious journalism. This, consequently, freezes the aspirations they have had in their jobs.

The government officials, the opposition party representatives and the academics concur in their view that the media could play a role in helping the transition to a democratic platform by being a forum for diverse political views, checking the excesses of government and questioning policies and strategies, and in general by informing and educating the public. Conceptually, one academic opines, this is not arguable but in pragmatic terms we see a difficulty. This is not peculiar to the Ethiopian private print media. Though the kind and intensity of the problem differs from place to place, one notices that if one views the history of newspaper development in Europe and America that critical questions about press freedom were left until a late date. At earlier times there were three critical questions: the right to print, the right to criticize and the right to report. They are still novel at this modern time leaving the argument unresolved. They

(the right to print, the right to criticize and the right to report) are the antecedents for any media to play their roles.

Whether media should help a transition process or not is "a matter of perspective," argues an editor from one of the private newspapers. However, the decision to play a positive role or otherwise and to define their roles should be left to the media themselves. If the reasons the media operate are to help take society along the democratic route, this is good for the people and the media. Freedom of expression though should have enough scope to accommodate diverse topics including what some consider as "hate speech," though no one considers hate speech as helping society. However, the editor extends his view: one should not "necessarily fight hate speech by closing the door or denying the space." It is fought by allowing diversified forms of speech.

A representative from one of the opposition parties opines that the private print media in Ethiopia are young and with limited experience. There were no training opportunities for the journalists in the private print media and this limited their professional capacities. "Strong pressure from the government" is also active where these infant media are operating. Taking all these limitations into consideration, the private print media are serving society according to their potential.

According to the editors, the private print media have played a role in the major cities of the country especially the metropolis, Addis Ababa, by informing the public of various issues (ranging from political, social and economic), concerning the government, opposition parties and the private sector.

It is a shared belief among the academics, the opposition politicians and the editors that the private print media encouraged public discourse by challenging and questioning the government,

opposition parties and other interest groups. The afore-mentioned roles, argues one of the editors, should be taken into account. This poses the question whether the private print media have accomplished their task with 'quality and accuracy;' and if they leveled the proper platform for their traditional watchdog role. However, it is undeniable that there was a huge disparity. One of the academics added his contention that some of the private print media were found to be "polarized" featuring "categorical condemnation and/or categorical appreciation."

The argument from the government side goes: the private print media in Ethiopia were not as such successful for the reason that they were used by people that have had political interests. They failed to draw the line between "organ for opposition parties and movements and professional journalistic practices." They lacked the ethical standards the profession demands and practised lopsided journalism. Hence, they were too immature to be "hijacked" by those who want to "change the government in an undemocratic way." It is wise not to generalize as there are some private papers that played a vital role, but the role, perceived as a whole, is insignificant considering the quest for a democratic system. The government respected their right to disseminate information and to criticize. The transition in Ethiopia goes from the backward feudal administration to the repressive system of the Dergue administration where press freedom was unthinkable. Following the defeat of the Dergue by the present government, a pertinent environment for freedom of expression has been formed; laws that put the freedom of the press in to effect are ratified allowing the private press to function, though it has failed to address societal expectations.

To realize a democratic system, argues one academic, the role of the government media is not enough. The private print media in Ethiopia no doubt contributed a lot but there happened to be some ill-motivated papers. Having little experience, some were observed to fall a prey to



sensational, individuals-focused news, while there are many crucial topics society demands to be addressed. Hence, some were not able to forward the transition to democracy and the development of professional journalism in Ethiopia but some were. This view is resonated by one editor when he says, "the majority of the private papers in Ethiopia are 'black' or 'white'-polarized. I believe our paper is grey." This problem of polarization and information imbalance is in part attributable to "low ethical standards and professionalism as we are at infantile stage." Press freedom in Ethiopia has a short history. We turned from absolute dictatorship (of the Marxist-led military regime, the Dergue), to a workable, though not sufficient, margin of freedom. Given the short experience, the role of the private print media is not insignificant (Neby Mekonen, personal communication, October 10, 2008). An editor of one newspaper asserts:

Considering how hard and tough the environment is, I am not specifically talking about government related matters or how the government is reacting to the press. I am talking about the whole political space, economic space, and cultural space existing in Ethiopia. How hard and tough it is. The very fact that newspapers are coming out regularly is a big accomplishment that I can say. (Tamirat Gebregiorgis, personal communication, September 13, 2008)

When we argue about the roles the private print media play, we should consider the context they are operating in. For example, we have to see their establishment. The establishment can be the structural, professional, economic aspect. Economic problems are forcing some papers to arrive and disappear before celebrating their first birthday. Professionally, the record of journalism by the private print media is not what the system demands. The existence of the private print media, although they have to struggle with internal and external challenges, as additional channels of communication for the audience, is encouraging. Considering the situation

before and during the 2005 election, the audience was getting substantial information about the government, opposition parties, and candidates running for the elections. Their presence is significant, argues an academic.

It is the belief of the editors resonated by one of the opposition politicians and one academic that the post 2005 election scenario and the unrest in connection with the election made more than 20 papers defunct. Therefore, we have to be clear about what transition are we discussing and are we heading to? Are the institutions prepared for a real transition foothold? Is the press itself institutionalized, as it is only then that it could serve as a bridge for the transition process? What kind of press are we referring to? Is it worth arguing that, a 'responsible' press can sustain the transition? However, partisanship regarding either the government or opposition is exhibited by some papers.

The Ethiopian private print media, as viewed by an opposition party representative, are seen to be of two kinds: "some are pro-government or like-minded;" others run by "independent people." Some of the private papers are also too "timid to criticize the government" due to the "pressure."

## **XI. The Private Media and Relations with the Government**

It is the editors' contention seconded by one academic that the private print media in Ethiopia have a "love-hate" relation with the government, other interest parties and society at large. There are bodies or people who like what the media do as there are bodies who do not. The government is no exception. The relationship between the media and other bodies should be in accordance with the rule of law that both abide by. The relationship between the private print media and the government, however, is characterized as a "suspicious" one. It seems worth classifying the nexus into four phases as there has been a 'love-hate' relationship in the course of time.

The first phase, which immediately followed the 1991 political change, can be characterized as an "optimistic" relationship where the government thought of opening the door to everyone so that freedom should thrive. The private print media also thought they were absolutely free. The private print media at that time were not required to have a license to function. The second phase was where the government decided to promulgate law with regard to the press and freedom of expression. Following that, the 1992 press law (Proclamation 34/1992) came into effect. The third phase could be called the "phase of friction." Due to the private print media's criticisms, of office holders and of the policies of the government, proper or improper, there was friction between the government and the private print media that shaped their views of each in terms of "extreme negativism." The fourth phase brought the friction to a climax. This phase started during the 2005 election when arguments over alleged voting flaws and the public unrest following it resulted in the imprisonment of journalists. That resulted in the collapse of the 22 newspapers that have become defunct since then. This is a great loss for the private media and society at large including the government.

The informants that represent the official line (government representatives) are of the view that the private print media need the government to put its hands away from any of their affairs. They condemn most of the private papers for being in "partisanship to opposition parties." This has been making the relationship between the government and the private papers hostile. The private print media tend to work in "blind opposition" to the government that leveled the conditions for their existence. Hence, it is believed that they have extreme hostility to this government. Their relationship was a sort of "polarized" one for the reason that the private print media failed to exhibit the values of professional journalism by being impartial and neutral. They rather were in "enmity" with the government.

The opposition describe the relationship as "full of tension," "really hostile," one where the private papers are "deliberately repressed" to silence them.

A position against a simple one directional relationship is also posed by an academic. According to him, there is no "monolithic" private press in Ethiopia. We have different kinds of print media with different modes of relationship with the official line. Thus, the private media, taking the risk of simplification, could be classified into three groups vis-à-vis their relation with the government. First, there are papers with an extreme editorial stance. The papers in this group have a "hostile" relationship reflected in extreme criticisms of the government and the imprisonment of journalists leaving the argument of its legitimacy or otherwise aside. The second group includes "pro-government" print media that do not oppose government policies but may criticize on the how of their implementation. On the other hand, there are print media, a tiny majority, in the middle ground. Their journalism is characterized not by outright support or criticism but a logical and responsible one. They tend to publish ardent criticism when they get the evidence to do so, just as they publish appreciative reports.

Seen in general terms, the nexus between the private media and the government is found to be unhealthy. The story of hostility, whoever caused it, did not help both sides (the media and the government) and the democratic process. The following section documents factors that triggered the course of the relationship.

## **XII. Factors Shaping the Private Print Media-Government Nexus**

It is the government's position that the major cause for the extreme negative relationship between the private print media and itself is the print media themselves, i.e. the "lack of ethics" of the journalists. The argument goes that the government specified the law and gave training for journalists. However, the private print media were off-truck being an instrument for bodies with

political interest. Exploiting the immediate aftermath of the Dergue (the Military) regime, the contents of most of the newspapers were reflecting one-sided political view always against the government. The government was forced to take up the issues in accordance with the law, bringing their cases to court. That resulted in "lack of trust in some of the private print media, for they distort government information" if given (Fantahun Asres, personal communication, September 20, 2008).

Counter to the preceding position, the opposition argue, the cause is lack of genuine interest from the side of the government in the private press. The government usually sees the private newspapers as "enemies to be destroyed" with a claim that they are supporting opposition parties. There are also "pro-government papers that presume to be independent." The bottom line of the story is that "the government lacked the guts to admit criticism and questioning." "Democracy is like a rose. It has beauty, scent, but it also has thorns. The government does not like the thorns – criticism." Constructive as well as negative criticism as far as it is supported by fact should be entertained (Dr. Hailu Araya, personal communication, September 2008).

The two editors from the private print media contend that the negative perception on either side, or the friction between the government and the private print media, is due to lack of experience. "We both of us [the private press and the government] are in a learning curve," asserts one of the editors, "the government has a lot more to learn about how media behaves and operates. And the media also have to learn how government and other parties behave and operate." The foundation as we laid for the course to change society need to be revised (personal communication, September 5, 2008). "We should no more believe in revolution," added the other editor, "but in evolution." The government should also be willing to learn the mechanics from its side so as to help this evolutionary process geared to democratic change. "The [1992] press law

was an attempt to revolutionize but it failed because the democratic institutions were not developed." Earlier there were cases where editors used pseudonyms -- the use of many pen names - because of fear of measures by the government. This is defeatism for the private press journalist (personal communication, September 5, 2008).

Seen from an academic perspective, there seems to be a shortage of government information in the contents of the private print media. This may be because "government officials do not open their doors for them." The antipathy between the government and the private print media is the result of several factors among others: "the partisan culture of Ethiopian politics" and "the lack of sincerity" of the private print media. There is a trend in Ethiopian politics of viewing a person not of one's political group with suspicion and enmity. This is being projected onto the relation between the government and the private print media. There is also this dilemma of freedom and control. We admire the start from the government side, but that is not enough. The problem emanated from the start, understanding the "conceptual framework." Whether journalists are employed by the government or working for the private media, the journalism should be the same following its professional canons. If both government-employed journalists and the journalists working for the private media are working for the respect of their professional practices apart from their personal tastes, the 'hostility' is likely to come to an end.

### **XIII. Challenges for the Private Print Media and Possible Remedy**

As an infant media in a developing environment, the private print media in Ethiopia are expected to have internal and external challenges. What are they and what are the suggestions for possible remedy?

The private print media are said to lack the capacity to serve the public interest. They are infants with an experience of about two decades. The government contends that the private print

media are staffed with "enthusiastic people without the proper expertise favoring the opposition." Thus, they are "victims of their own making." There is a lack of professionalism in Ethiopia as the freedom of the press is a recent phenomenon. Some of the people who hold different positions, the argument continues, including important positions like "editor-in-chief jumped in the profession either by accident, for earning a livelihood or as a way of accomplishing a political interest." Due to the problem of institutionalization, there were instances of influence of wholesalers and distributors going so far as to set the news agenda.

The opposition, the academics and the editors are of the similar view that the main challenge is the "pressure" from the government which uses tedious ways of giving licenses and taking legal actions. There is a lack of freedom. The private print media are not given the legal and political atmosphere they deserve to function well in practice, though the constitution provided them with this. The other challenge is the inflated cost of publication that these young private print media cannot afford. Among the printing enterprises, there is only one printing press in the country, Berhanena Selam, which has a machine to print newspapers with more than twenty pages. Lack of professional training to improve the work of the private print media is also the other challenge.

One of the editors observes that the struggle for an independent institution is still an assignment for the private print media. It has to depend on individuals who establish the media organizations. "So turning that into institution where individuals matter but they are not indispensable" is the main challenge (personal communication, September 5, 2008). There should be a transition from the individual vendor type business operation. Lack of a strong professional association is the other challenge. There are about seven professional associations<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The list of professional journalists associations include: Ethiopian Journalists association (EJA), Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association (EFJA), Ethiopian Sport Journalists Association, Ethiopian Women Journalists

many of which, with the exception of the Ethiopian Journalists Association (EJA) and the Ethiopian Free Press Journalists association (EFJA), were not doing their job properly. They were rather engaged "in their own internal disputes."

Other external challenges apart from the legal and political environment include: culture and the market (the literacy level). One of the editors is quoted as saying, "There is [also] a culture of intolerance when media make mistakes. Taking the mistakes as deliberate and assuming a conspiracy behind them" is among the challenges. His view is resonated by all of the academics who also went on to observe the size of the market as discouraging (personal communication, September 5, 2008).

One academic observes that the government-owned media is focusing only on positive news leading the people to distrust them. The editors and one academic also see another handicap for the private print media. They conceive "advertisement revenue, due to limited circulation," as affecting the private papers because in the Ethiopian context "radio is more accessible than TV, and TV is more accessible than newspapers" (personal communication, September 5, 2008). Although there is a population of above 70 million, the largest circulated paper is around 40 to 50 thousands. Compare this with next door Kenya, argues Tamirat Gebregiorgis, Managing editor of *Fortune* newspaper, where a newspaper has a circulation in hundred thousand. *The Nation*, for example, has about 7000 shareholders let alone readers, which is not the case with the Ethiopian private papers.

As for remedies to the challenges stated earlier, all the politicians and the academics concur in their view to advise the private media to institutionalize itself. According to the academics, the opposition politicians and the editors, the cost of publication seems to be exaggerated and needs



reconsideration. The government offices and public figures should open their doors for journalists from the private print media, and the private print media also have to attempt reporting all views in fairness. A culture of tolerance and discussion should be encouraged. Capitalizing weaknesses and fault finding helps nobody, the government, the press itself and society at large. Legitimate criticism, however, should be encouraged so that the press helps the transition to democracy.

#### **XIV. The Private Print Media and the Legal Framework**

It is argued according to the official line that the constitution and subsequent laws provided the private media with many privileges. The new Information and Communication Act that came in to effect in July 2008 that is said to "put the experiences of different countries in to consideration," for example, "protected the journalist from the government, businessmen and others with their own interest" (Fantahun Asres, personal communication, September 5, 2008). In some countries, freedom of expression is fought over, but it is not the case with our country. It secured the private media's right to access information from government officials and institutions unless the information is deemed to be security related and defined as 'classified' by the House of People Representatives and the House of Ministers. However, the private print media "failed" to claim this right because of their own internal problems. The private media have every right to be independent without prejudice and avoiding bias.

The other side of the argument sees the legal context for the private media as a "mixed bag." The argument goes: the private media are protected by the constitution that inhibits any kind of prior censorship and has sections similar to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that prohibits the government from imposing ban on freedom of speech with the exception of very limited areas like protecting human dignity, protecting minors and prohibiting

the media from inciting war and violence. However, it does not mean there is no problem in practice, argues one of the editors, as there is the press law which sometimes conflicts with the ideals of the constitution. "There is confusion between the revised criminal code and the press law." "There is disparity between the laws and the practice," added another editor and an opposition politician (personal communication, September 5, 2008). Fines imposed on journalists are exaggerated and discouraging for the development of this young institution (private press) working with a limited capital and economic problems. Measures taken by the government incline to be "harassment" rather than correcting mistakes in order to nurture professional practices, contends one editor (personal communication, September 5, 2008).

In search of explanations for the disparities in the legal context, the academics and the editors are of a similar view when they state the problem to be a lack of proper experience by the private print media and the government. The editors believe that the understanding of the judiciary to go to the distance it takes to protect journalists is also one of the factors. Moreover, one academic observes, the laws though workable at the start of the "new era" are not sufficient and need to be progressive. The private press should also do proper journalism respecting professional ethics and the law (personal communication, September 5, 2008).

#### **XV. The Private Print Media and Journalistic Responsibility**

Given the aforementioned internal and external challenges, limitations and short-lived experience, a logical question follows: to what extent are the private print media viewed as managing to practise "responsible" journalism by exhibiting the professional ideals of fairness, neutrality, balance, and objectivity?

The honorable Mr. Ahmed Hasan, Member of Parliament and Deputy to the Culture and Information Standing Committee in the House of People's Representatives, is quoted as arguing,

"The intelligentsia [the journalists and writers for the private newspapers] betrayed the public, unable to use the past sixteen years except in entrenching personal interests in the press and its practices" (personal communication, October 10, 2008).

The above view is countered by the honorable Dr. Merera Gudina, Member of Parliament and opposition politician, when he observes that the private media are "working under pressure." He went on to argue, "The watchful eyes of the government are on them to make them accountable." According to him, the political environment determines the way the media respond. Without the political environment allowing the media to mature, it will be naïve to expect much from them. First, they should be helped to build their capacity before expecting something significant from them (personal communication, September 5, 2008). One opposition politician holds the view that given all the limitations (financial, exaggerated cost of publication, limited experience, and government pressure), the kind of service given by the private print media, though insufficient, is proportional. "There may be papers used as instruments by groups. Some are also used by the government." It is not safe to generalize, one academic recounts, "There are 'good' papers as there may be 'bad' ones" (personal communication, September 5, 2008).

There is a consensus among the politicians, the academics, and the editors that there are problems of bias and partisan treatment among some of the private print media. One opposition politician, Dr Hailu Araya, states that partisanship and promoting a certain side – be it the government or the opposition – is destructive for all. "I want the press to be in partisanship to my side only if I am in partisanship to human rights, justice and democracy." One editor also witnesses problems of "polarization, being politicized and emotional reporting" but, he contends, "The graph is growing to the positive" (personal communication, September 5, 2008).

It is a shared view between the academics and the editors that the journalism of the private print media has some limitations. Economic problems, shortage of professionals with the required expertise, lack of access to government information (from government officials) and the absence of a strong professional association of journalists that could develop and implement its own code of conduct, are the main ones. These limitations, no doubt, are projected in the activities of the private newspapers. Some of the standards of journalism, objectivity for instance, are difficult to attain in their real sense. However, objectivity manifests itself if there is fairness and balance. When we say responsibility, we mean that the responsibility should be reflected in the news reports. They are responsible to some extent. The problems associated with journalistic responsibility are more professional than other limitations (finance, legal, etc.).

It is quite natural in any industry to have good and bad quality goods and services. No one prefers to produce a 'bad' quality product. One editor contends:

I do not think anyone wants to be irresponsible. It has to do with skill and talent and whether we have a working force. All of us want to be a credible source of information to our readers, but, who defines 'responsibility'? Whose version? If the government defines responsibility, this is its version of it. If the opposition does, it is the same thing. As for credibility, this is the cornerstone of our profession (personal communication, September 5, 2008).

It is a shared view among all the informants that the role of the private print media in a democratic process is vital, and it should be encouraged. The experience of other countries and conventional wisdom tell us that media are the fourth branch of government; one of the institutions that exposes wrong practices such as corruption and favoritism.

A point of departure by the editors, the opposition and the academics, however, is that the private print media in Ethiopia have played roles in that respect amidst various limitations. They

believe the challenges and limitations could be resolved with the involvement of all stakeholders in journalism: the press, the government, other interest groups and the public at large. One academic went on to opine that brainstorming and working together to bring a better developed journalism is one of the premises for the transition to a democratic platform. Journalists in the private press should also understand that "a newspaper is a history in the making." Hence, it should be handled with accuracy, avoiding biased and emotion-loaded reporting. The government also needs to welcome constructive critics rather than portray newspapers in a negative light. The latter view is furthered by one editor, Neby Mekonen, when he asserts, "the government should give them [the private print media] a crutch when they experience fracture, rather than seeing them lame" (personal communication, September 5, 2008). The academics, the editors and the opposition categorically stated that it is crucial to see that journalism is a 'business' that needs different hands to realize it.

## **XVI. Conclusion**

Establishing a professional media system is one of the routes to a successful transition to democracy and the realization of it. The Ethiopian print media is at its infantile stage struggling with both internal and external challenges. Though it is contributing its share in the transition process, it can be argued at the outset that its performance is below what society demands. The full scale professionalization of journalism in the country is a task for all the stakeholders who benefit from the practice of journalism. The low readership culture and the sensitivity of the socio-political context may impede the private print media from achieving this.

The private print media needs to professionalize itself and maintain accountable journalism. The opening of journalism programmes in some of the higher institutions is encouraging. It is worth noting that the establishment of a media system and the realization of a tolerant socio-

political environment, as exemplified by some African countries and mainly by Ghana, is not an overnight march.

The issue of access to information and autonomous practice of the media, as Colby (2005) argues, is decisive for the media if it is to exhibit fairness. Equally, framing is partly determined by access. Hence, paving the way for the private media to get equal access to government held information helps the media to refrain from citing the so-called "well informed sources," which has been common in the journalism of the Ethiopian private print media.

## References

- Article 19 (2003). The legal framework for freedom of expression in Ethiopia. Retrieved January 2, 2008 from <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/ethiopia-legal-framework-for-foe.pdf>
- Birhanu, O. (2006). The professional orientation of journalists: Survey of their self-perception. (Unpublished Master's dissertation, Addis Ababa University).
- Colby, D. (2005). Toward a new media autonomy. *Communication Law and Policy*, 10. *Development Initiative*. Published by BBC World Service Trust. Retrieved January 5, 2008 from <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/pdf/AMDI/ethiopia/amdi-ethiopia-full-report.pdf>
- Ethiopian Broadcast Authority. (December 2011). *Quarterly Newsletter*, 1 (9). Addis Ababa.
- Ethiopian Broadcast Authority. (June 2012). Special Edition Bulletin on the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the organization. Addis Ababa: Perfect P.P.
- Ethiopian Broadcast Authority. (April 2013). *Quarterly Newsletter*, 1(14). Addis Ababa.
- Gebremedhin, S. (2006). Ethiopia research findings and conclusions. *African Media Initiative*. Retrieved September 28, 2013 from [africanmediainitiative.org/file/2013-07-22-amdi-report-](http://africanmediainitiative.org/file/2013-07-22-amdi-report-)

ethiopia

Hailemarekos A. (2006). *News bias in Ethiopian press during the 2005 national election*.

(Unpublished Master's dissertation. Addis Ababa University).

International Press Institute. (2005). *IPI watch list: Ethiopia*. Retrieved on January 5, 2008

from <http://www.freemedia.at/cms/ipi/watchlislistdetail.html?country=KW0155>.

Louw, E. (2005). *Media and the political process*. London: Sage Publications

Lulit G. (2003). Reporting children's rights: A case study on Ethiopia. *IFJ*

McQuail, D. (1991). Media performance assessment in the public interest: Principles and methods. In J. Anderson (Ed.), *Communication year book, 14*. U.S.A.: Sage Publications.

McQuail, D. (1996). Mass media in the public interest: Towards a Framework of norms for media performance. In J. Curran & M. Gurevitch (Eds.), *Mass media and society*. London: Anrold.

McQuail, D. (2006). *McQuail's mass Communication theory* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). London: Sage Publications.

MOE. (2010). *Education Sector Development Program IV* (ESDP IV). Retrieved September 15, 2013 from [planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/Ethiopia/Ethiopia\\_ESDP\\_IV.pdf](http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/Ethiopia/Ethiopia_ESDP_IV.pdf)

Nebiyu, Y. (2008). Self-censorship among print journalists in Ethiopian government media.

(Unpublished Master's dissertation. Addis Ababa University).

Nwanko, N. R. (2000). Press politics and state in Africa: Theoretical framework and overview.

In O. M'Bayo, O. R. Chuka, & N. R. Nwafo (Eds.), *Press and politics in Africa* U.S.A.:

Edwin Mellen Press.

Population Media Center. (PMC). (2006). *Ethiopian mass media profile*. Addis Ababa.

Shimelis, B. (2000). Survey of the private press in Ethiopia: 1991-1999. *FSS Mobograph Series*

I. Addis Ababa: Forum for Social Studies.

Shimelis, B. (2006). The state of the private press in Ethiopia. In Z. Bahiru & S. Pausewang (Eds.), *Ethiopia: The challenge of democracy from below* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed) (pp. 186-201). Addis Ababa: United Printers.

Skjerdal, T. S., & Hallelujah L. (2009). Uneven performances by the private press in Ethiopia: An analysis of 18 years of press freedom. *Journal of Communication & Language Arts: Special Issue on Media and Democracy*, 3 (1), pp 44-59.

Skjerdal, T. S. (2011). Teaching journalism or teaching African journalism? Experiences from foreign involvement in a journalism programme in Ethiopia. *Global Media Journal African Edition*, 5(1), pp 24-51.

Stromback, J. (2005). In search of a standard: Four models of democracy and their normative implications for journalism. *Journalism Studies*, 6 (3), pp 331-345.

Tsega, M., & Abebe, G. (December 2000). Media status report: Ethiopia. Retrieved on January 19, 2008 from <http://www.gret.org/parama/uk2/resource/edm/pdf/ethiopie.pdf>

Retrieved June 2, 2008 from <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78734.htm>