DEVELOPING
INDEPENDENT MEDIA ASSOCIATIONS
IN ETHIOPIA

Challenges and Opportunities for New Reform

March 2019
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Introduction

The fundamental question many are asking is how to build a stable, peaceful and prosperous Ethiopia where diversity of views, identities and interests are respected and engrained in public discourse facilitated by a professional and responsible media.

The urgency of this matter is amplified by the volatile political undercurrent shaping the country’s future. Elections are planned for next year in the backdrop of a political rhetoric heavily influenced by ethnic strife. At an event commemorating his first year in office, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed stressed the need for a responsible and ethical media that promotes healthy and pluralistic political debate.

In reality, the Ethiopian media is just starting to revive from decades of systemic authoritarian repression and struggling to find its footing. The media landscape in Ethiopia today is characterized by partisan reporting, politically affiliated ownership and lack of professionalism. The good news is that the current government has embarked on sweeping reform of policy and legislation governing the media and other institutions.

This report evaluates the role journalist associations and media organizations play in the development of professional standards in the media sector in Ethiopia. It analyzes strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to determine what journalist associations and other media institutions need to be watchdogs of public interest and constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and information.

This report lays out a vision for media policy and interventions aiming at the development of independent and professional media institutions. It evaluates the functions and obligations of government, civil society, media owners and journalists in media policy and regulation under existing laws and planned legislative reforms and their impact in the sector.

This document explores innovative models for journalism training that open avenues for local entrepreneurs, media training and research institutions, as well as in-house training facilities for Ethiopian media.

If the media landscape in Ethiopia is to improve, sustained investment in the sector to build its human resources capacity and business sustainability are critical. New reform efforts to amend restrictive laws is a positive step. Institutional resistance from government agencies to implement planned reform on access to information, free expression and media regulation calls for strong execution strategies. Institutionalizing governance accountability during political transitions is a difficult process; but it is the only way to consolidate a functional democracy.
Ethiopia’s prime minister Abiy Ahmed assumed power in April 2018 following three years of anti-government protests and violent government repression that threatened to plunge the country into failure. On his inaugural address, Abiy signaled his intention to introduce liberal reforms. He highlighted the urgency to build independent and vibrant media that inform, lead the conversation, and uphold accountability in the transition towards democracy.

“Building democratic institutions is a matter of survival for us,” Abiy said, shifting from his party’s ideology that reducing poverty and improving healthcare and education outweigh the development of an independent media sector. In his nationally televised address, Abiy promised his new administration will communicate effectively, listen to critics, and ensure accountability.

Since then, Abiy’s administration has embarked on reforms to overhaul the country’s media and communications policy and legal framework. A press secretariat has been established under the prime minister’s office to enhance effective government communication. A working group comprising journalists, lawyers, government representatives and scholars has been formed, and it is working with the Ministry of Justice to amend draconian media laws. Hopes and expectations are high on account of a revised civil society law adopted by parliament in February 2019 that lifted overreaching administrative and funding restrictions on professional associations and other civic groups. Despite legislative improvements, the state of media remains dismal, due to past funding and structural limitations.

As the prime minister moves to fulfill his promises, he is confronting challenges to transform a sector that was built for authoritarian control in a political environment fractured by deep ethnic and political divisions.

Ownership and funding are important considerations if the media landscape in Ethiopia is to thrive. The majority of Ethiopians rely on state-run or party-affiliated terrestrial or satellite broadcasting. Dissemination of news and information is polarized along political, ethnic, and other allegiances. The media’s watchdog role has diminished through structural, economic and legal challenges.

Truly independent media in Ethiopia is rare, and growth is either stifled or driven by political agendas. Efforts should be focused on building the capacity of media houses and creating a level playing field where their business gains are determined by a free marketplace. Journalist associations should be strengthened to become good stewards of professional standards and self-governance.
EPRDF Comes to Power
The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front takes power overthrowing a military regime. The new administration sets up a transitional charter promoting constitutional order and freedom of expression—including that of the media—among a wide range of other democratic rights.

Private Media Flourishes
A landmark press law is enacted allowing private media ownership. Close to 300 publications would mushroom throughout the next decade—most of them private. This marks the emergence of a critical press that freely condemned the government in writing and political cartoons.

The First Professional Association Emerges
The Ethiopian Journalists Association (EJA), the oldest professional union in the country, restructures itself, with only state media journalists as members.

Private Media Form Unions
The private press establishes Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association (EFJA). It takes the association eight years to register legally.

Ethiopia Ratifies New Constitution
The new constitution guarantees the right to free speech, prohibits any form of censorship and grants citizens access to public information. A prominent journalist describes the move as a “tectonic shift” in the country’s political structure that ushered in “far-reaching consequences” to free speech in Ethiopia.

Women Journalists Create a Union
The Ethiopian Media Women Association is the result of this union. Today, the once vibrant association is struggling to pay office rent and phone bills.

Ethiopian Broadcast Agency Is Born
The government broadcast regulating body is setup, with a far-reaching mandate on licensing and regulation of broadcast operations.

Ethiopian National Journalists Union (ENJU) Is Set Up
It takes ENJU several years to gain international recognition due to campaigns against it by other groups for being co-opted by the government.

Universities Launch Journalism Programs
Addis Ababa and Bahir Dar universities introduce journalism programs. Dozens of other universities would follow suit.

2005
• Journalists and political leaders face imprisonment in the aftermath of the highly contested national elections.
• The leadership of the Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association faces ban; following which, new leadership is elected. Former leaders protest saying the new leadership is appointed by government. By year’s end, the former EFFJA leadership goes in exile to avoid the government’s charges of treason and attempted genocide.1

2007
• Four years later, its founding president flees the country. Members who took control of its leadership face increased government harassment forcing them to halt operations.

2008
• Freedom of Mass Media and Access to Information Act comes into effect.
• Ethiopian Photo Journalists Association is established.

2009
• The Charities and Societies Proclamation is enacted with severe funding and registration restrictions for civic groups and associations.

2010
• After the national elections, the ruling EPRDF claims winning 97.6 % of parliamentary seats.

2011
• The law enacts broad provisions that encroaches on freedom of speech and the press. Ethiopia becomes one of the world’s leading jailers of journalists and writers.

2015
• EPRDF wins 100% of parliamentary seats. Popular discontent rages in Ethiopia’s most populous Oromia region, with other regions eventually following suit later. Considering mainstream media is under state capture, protest leaders use social media to share information and organize their base.

2018
• In an attempt to avoid state failure due to unrelenting protests, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigns. Abiy Ahmed succeeds him with sweeping promises of democratic reforms.

Ethiopia is at a critical juncture. Africa’s second-most populated country nearly slipped into chaos, despite two decades of sustained, double-digit economic growth. The threat still lingers, with deep ethnic undertones shaping political discourse, amplified by government- or political-affiliated mainstream and social media.

However, there are positive developments in the media sector, inspired by a new, optimistic attitude and reform efforts by the government. Over the past year, scores of print and broadcast media have emerged, initiated mainly by recently freed journalists and bloggers. A number of exiled media institutions have returned home to set up shop. Journalist unions that survived more than a decade of political pressure, funding and regulatory restrictions are rising from the ashes. This has created an urgent need to strengthen the capacity of media institutions to enable them to be independent, professional, pluralistic, and financially sustainable.

About This Report

This report is the result of a study conducted by MERSA Media Institute, in partnership with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom, with the aim of examining the role journalist associations play in the development of professional standards, regulatory mechanisms and advancement of free speech in Ethiopia. The study identifies existing professional associations, legal and political restrictions limiting their functions, and their capacity to fulfil their civic duties.

The study has two main analytical contexts: understanding the roles of government, civil society, media owners and journalists in media policy and regulation under existing laws and planned legislative reforms; and identifying replicable local models and relevant regional paradigms.

This report provides sets of recommendations for media stakeholders involved in policy and regulatory reform efforts currently underway in Ethiopia. Our goal is to help create an understanding of the media and civil society landscape in Ethiopia, and the potential impact of reforms in these sectors. To achieve these goals, the study does the following:

1. Reviews existing media and civil society laws, impacts of legal reforms and new opportunities for sectoral organizations.

2. Provides contextual analysis on reforms needed by media associations and journalists and identifies capacity-building support that industry leaders, unions and practitioners hope to get from potential partners.

3. Provides a comparative analysis for replicable and relevant models from local and regional experiences, and identifies lessons to be drawn for Ethiopia.

The Fundamentals: Why Support Independent Media Institutions?

Ethiopia is at a critical juncture. Africa’s second-most populated country nearly slipped into chaos, despite two decades of sustained, double-digit economic growth. The threat still lingers, with deep ethnic undertones shaping political discourse, amplified by government- or political-affiliated mainstream and social media.

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This document could serve as a reference to guide future partnerships to support the development of robust, independent and responsible media and professional associations in Ethiopia.

**How The Study Was Conducted**

Field research was conducted in Addis Ababa throughout four weeks in February and March 2019, and includes more than 35 hours of in-depth interviews with media association leaders, media owners, journalists, government regulators, and academics. Forty-two media stakeholders were interviewed in person and by phone; they also participated in a survey designed to identify gaps, opportunities and threats to the sector.

This report maps out journalist associations and media councils registered in Ethiopia, and those pending registration.

A desk review of existing legislation and regulatory mechanisms was also conducted to analyze the possible impact of key provisions under Ethiopian law that adversely affect media businesses and associations.

**Assessment Method**

This study analyzes strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) to determine what journalist associations and other key institutions require to be effective stewards of the reform and transition process in Ethiopia. This method helps identify various opportunities, risks and challenges that exist in the process of developing professional associations and journalistic standards in Ethiopia. Information collected from interviews with influential media owners, association leaders, journalists and scholars was used as a building block for the SWOT analysis on media associations. An in-depth look into the media accountability ecosystem is an essential component of this study.

**Scope**

The field research was conducted in Addis Ababa, where most national media organizations and associations are based. Studies incorporating the perspectives of regional media in Ethiopia are essential to achieving a more accurate understanding of the national media landscape. Comprehending policy, regulation, and other capacity challenges to regional media can provide fundamental feedback on sectoral reform and capacity-building efforts beyond the scope of this study.
In March 2019, Ethiopia’s oldest journalist association called members of the media for a press conference to commemorate its 50th anniversary. Ethiopia Hotel, founded within the same decade as the association, was the chosen venue. Two service staffers were busy handing out golden jubilee banners—a last-minute effort to get the conference room ready.

Meseret Atalay, president of the Ethiopian Journalists’ Association, settled into a chair at the far end of the room. Only one reporter from the state media showed up for the event. Later, he was joined by another reporter from the city government. The two sat next to each other at the end of a long conference table, flanked by empty seats on each side.

Meseret pulled out his black-rimmed glasses and began to read a statement to the near-empty room: “Founded during an absolute monarchy where freedom of speech and association were not respected, Ethiopian Journalists’ Association today celebrates 50 years of service under three regimes,” he said, pausing before a camera.

**Ethiopian Journalists Association (EJA)** was established in 1969 following two failed attempts to set up a professional union during emperor Haile Selassie’s regime. Some 70 state media journalists and public relations practitioners gathered at a YMCA gymnasium on Adwa victory day to announce the formation of the association. Members elected Kebede Anissa, a famous radio show host, as the organization’s first president. At the time, the government Ministry of Pen directly supervised the association, ultimately serving at the will of the emperor.

During the Derg military regime, EJA’s leadership was under the payroll of the socialist government, and looked east for support and guidance. During this period, all journalists were obligated to be members of EJA and made membership contributions through involuntary payroll deductions.

After the end of the military rule in 1992, EJA revised its bylaws to focus on protecting journalists, enhancing journalistic standards through codes of ethics, and developing the capacity of professionals. Its current membership is composed of nearly 450 voluntary state media journalists.

The 50-year-old Ethiopian Journalists Association has a history of state affiliation since its foundation, an organizational track record that it struggles to shake off until today.
EJA's current president, Meseret Atalay, openly professes his past political membership of the ruling EPRDF. “I don’t feel any shame for supporting EPRDF, I still support them. I believe EPRDF has positively contributed to the development of this country,” he said.

EJA is not an isolated case of state capture of journalist associations. Many national organizations face co-opted leadership through coercion, imprisonment of defiant leaders, and forced exile of leaders.

**The Private Media Forms Unions**

Something unprecedented happened in Ethiopia in 1992 — private ownership of media was allowed by law. A year later, Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association (EFJA) was founded. Its members were journalists, editors and publishers of the newly flourishing free press. Not so free in reality, as the leadership of the new association was composed of state media managers and journalists from the socialist era, who were sidelined by the new EPRDF regime. For eight years, the association and its 80 members from the private media, struggled to register formally as a non-profit entity with the Ministry of Justice.

EFJA showed solidarity with journalists as the government’s tolerance dwindled for the 300 plus publications. More than 15 journalists were arrested in 1998. The following year, 45 journalists appeared in court for violating the press law. EFJA set up legal defense funds for journalists and openly and vigorously advocated for their release.

When the state-owned publishing house that printed all private and public newspapers and magazines decided to increase printing price in 2000, EFJA led a week-long resistance that had most publications cease printing in protest.

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1 Meseret Atalay, president of EJA, in an interview with MERSA Media Institute, February 2019.
EFJA is credited for facilitating trainings to improve the professional skills of its members. “Most journalists did not have formal training at the time, since there was no journalism school in the country,” said Wondossen Mekonnen, current president of EFJA and member since the early ‘90s. “We facilitated practical journalism trainings in partnership with the Thomson Foundation, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the British and U.S. embassies.”

EFJA also issued a professional code of conduct for journalists in 1998. The code highlights the role of the journalist as a watchdog in search of the truth and holding those in power accountable. Accuracy, balance and objective reporting of news and information in a comprehensive manner are listed as the hallmarks of good reporting in EFJA’s code of conduct.

**Controversies and Ban**

In 1994 and 95, some EFJA members began to criticize the decision of the association’s leadership to participate as observers, and later as voting members of a coalition of political opposition—the Council of Alternative Forces for Peace and Democracy.³ Two of four former members of the association interviewed for this study had left after this decision.

Such involvements and the leadership composition of EFJA made the association and its members a target for government harassment, imprisonment and ban. In 2003, EFJA faced a government ban for allegedly failing to file audit reports and its properties were confiscated. The association won the ensuing court battle, but its victory was short-lived; a splinter group from within the ranks claimed legal recognition bearing the same name and the Ministry of Justice allowed it. According to a State Department human rights report (2004), new executives were elected in January at a meeting facilitated by the Ministry of Justice. The original leadership went to court again and won the case. The following year, EFJA’s president, Kifle Mulat, was one of the people wanted by the government on charges of treason and genocide. The president and 40 other members of the association fled the country.

The new EFJA continued operating under the leadership of Wondossen Mekonnen, a former private media publisher whose two newspapers folded due to financial problems. Since then, Wondossen has been working in the state media.⁴ Today, the association does not have an office or any known members, and its registration has not been renewed in years.

“We were not able to fulfil our duties under stifling laws and financial restrictions,” Wondossen said in an interview for this report, adding “the organization is as good as dead.”

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³ Tamrat Gebregiorgis, Melaku Demissie, Wondossen Mekonnen and Issayas Mekuria, in an interview with MERSA Media Institute, February and March 2019.
⁴ Wondossen Mekonnen, president of EFJA, in an interview with MERSA Media Institute, February 2019.
Special Interest Media Associations

The Ethiopian Media Women Association (EMWA) was founded in 1997; it was officially registered two years later. EMWA worked to improve the working conditions of women journalists and advocated for the creation of a media landscape that includes women’s voices in the development of a vibrant, diverse and inclusive public discourse in Ethiopia. To this end, EMWA challenged conventional cultural norms, held leadership and communication structures accountable and demanded gender inclusion in the media sector.

Its membership was open to all women journalists and students: Ethiopian, foreign correspondents, university students and high school girls working in mini-media. With solid organizational structure and transparency, EMWA managed to attract more than 200 members. Leaders of the association communicated with members through a quarterly magazine featuring articles that members contributed on journalism, gender policy and norms, and even articles challenging the EMWA leadership.

The association worked closely with local, regional and international government and non-government groups. EMWA’s exchange programs with African and Scandinavian compatriots helped develop the capacity of its members and those of partner organizations. Female Ethiopian journalists enjoyed a one-year exchange program in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania.

EMWA had an impeccable track record in raising reporting standards by training its members, as well as formulating numerous codes of conduct on gender sensitivity, sexual harassment and child abuse reporting.

CSO Law Deals a Crippling Blow

On a hot, sunny afternoon in February 2019, retired journalist Tekabech Assefa was busy dusting furniture at the offices of the Ethiopian Media Women Association. Rolls of dusty curtains were gathered at the conference table in the center of the largest room. There are no chairs. Dust particles floated amid the sunlight peeking through the windows.

Once a busy office with 16 staffers and 200 members, the headquarters of Ethiopian women journalists is in a grim state.

“No one comes here anymore,” Tekabech said, “they are all gone.”

The nearly 70-year-old retired journalist keeps the doors open every day in honor of her late friends who had worked diligently to establish the women journalists’ association.

“We had so many bright young female journalists working with us; but the money is gone, there are no projects, so they all disappeared one by one,” she added.

The phone lines are cut. The computers are out of order and belong in a museum. The rent is six months overdue and eviction is a real possibility. This is the impact of Ethiopia’s civil society law that passed foreign funding restrictions on media associations, as well as other civic groups.

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5 Selome Desta, EMWA founding and current executive committee member, in an interview with MERSA Media Institute, February 2019.
7 A visit at EMWA’s office by MERSA Media Institute, February, 2019.
A Worker’s Union

In 2003, the Ethiopian National Journalists Union (ENJU) came into existence as a workers’ union that excluded media owners as members. Journalists from both the private and public media were eligible for membership.

In its bylaws, ENJU vowed to represent the interests of journalists, protect them from abuse by their employers and enhance journalistic standards by facilitating training for its members. From the onset, ENJU’s formation was heavily contested. Outside advocacy groups dubbed ENJU as a union of Ethiopian government cadres masquerading to be journalists.8

ENJU’s last known leader, Anteneh Abrham, said in an interview for this study he fled the country escaping abuse from security officials who allegedly harassed him because of an article he published in a newspaper.9 Anteneh faced criticism during his tenure for statements he made on state media saying there are no journalists arrested in Ethiopia in “connection with their journalistic work”; while the country was reported for being a leading jailer of journalists and bloggers by Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) and other international media rights group reports.

ENJU has not renewed its license since the leader fled the country three years ago.

Ethiopian Environmental Journalists Association (EEJA)

In 2007, a group of journalists set up the Ethiopian Environmental Journalists Association to advance specialized professional reporting on climate change, agriculture, food security and sustainable development in Ethiopia. Initially an association, EEJA was re-registered as a foreign NGO when the 2009 CSO law came to effect. “If we had resisted as a local association, we would have been subjected to foreign funding restrictions,” EEJA’s founding director Argaw Ashine said in an interview for this study. “Our existence depended on it.”

Special interest media associations enjoy relative freedom because they tend to be politically neutral. Membership in these associations is quite robust and active. The Ethiopian Media Women Association, Ethiopian Environmental Journalists Association and Ethiopian Sports Journalists Association are good examples of local institutions that had a demand-initiated, bottom-up mobilization of professionals in the media sector.

EEJA faced government scrutiny when its founding president fled after his name was exposed in a WikiLeaks cable, resulting in government intimidation and harassment.10 EEJA members elected a new leader and continued to operate under scrutiny.11 But the weight of regulatory restrictions under the CSO law, and being

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9 Anteneh Abrham, President of ENJU, in an interview with MERSA Media Institute, March 2019.
11 Argaw Ashine, EEJA founder and director, in an interview with MERSA Media Institute, March 2019.
under the microscope of government security officials, pushed away members. EEJA’s went through a period of decline, and finally ceased to exist in 2017.

During its brief existence, EEJA created numerous professional development opportunities for its members, including travel abroad in exchange programs. Through competitive funding of environmental reporting projects, EEJA contributed to the enhancement of beat reporting standards in Ethiopia12.

TABLE-List of Journalist Associations in Ethiopia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Association Established</th>
<th>YR</th>
<th>Membership</th>
<th>Registration Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopian Journalists Association (EJA)</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>State media journalists</td>
<td>Registered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association (EFJA)</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Private media journalists</td>
<td>Expired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopian Media Women Association (EMWA)</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Women journalists</td>
<td>Registered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopian National Journalists Union (ENJU)</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Reporters and editors of private and public media</td>
<td>Expired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopian Environmental Journalists Association</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Environment beat reporters</td>
<td>Expired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopian Photo Journalists Association</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Photo journalists, private and public media</td>
<td>Expired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopian Sport Journalists Association</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sports journalists, private and public media</td>
<td>Registered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopian Publishers Association,</td>
<td></td>
<td>Private publishers</td>
<td>Registered</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12 EEJA-Fellowship grant available for journalists, public notice.
A number of internal governance issues, coupled with adverse government pressure, have hindered media associations from being stewards of free speech and contributing to the overall progress of the industry. Over the past two decades, annual State Department reports, CPJ, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have all documented systemic state harassment, intimidation and imprisonment of journalists and their association leaders. For instance, two leaders of the Ethiopian Environmental Journalists Association fled the country on the basis of abuse and fear of being tried under the ill-reputed Anti-Terrorism Proclamation of 2011.

The remaining associations are either politically co-opted or self-censored. In both instances, they lose credibility in the face of their members and the media community. The other group is composed of associations that engage in special interest advocacy on gender, the environment, and sports. Most independent journalists distance themselves from the former, and some seek active membership in special interest media associations who are perceived to be politically neutral.

More than 90 percent of influential journalists and editors interviewed and surveyed for this report say they are not members of journalist associations.

Independence, Organizational Culture and Structure

Most journalist associations in Ethiopia suffer from a credibility crisis due to state interference, politically appointed leadership and serious accountability issues that alienate their constituency. Associations created to advocate for the protection of journalists failed to show solidarity with journalists and writers, especially in the past decade when Ethiopia ranked top amongst the worst jailers of journalists by international media advocacy groups.13

The overwhelming majority of respondents interviewed for this study said they have decided not to be members of journalist associations in Ethiopia because they do not feel these groups represent their interests or show solidarity.

“The rationale behind the existence of such associations was not a need-based bottom-up drive,” said one veteran newspaper publisher. “Passive members are usually called to elect leaders who are unaccountable to them. Often, the leaders leave their day jobs and focus on making a living out of international funding, travel, and per diems.”14

The newly appointed progressive director of the government regulator, Ethiopian Broadcast Authority, shared the same concerns in an interview for this study, stating: “The associations existed to serve the personal interests of their leaders; not their constituency or the profession. That is why they have very few members, squabble amongst themselves and journalists have given up on them.”15

14 Tamrat Gubregiorgis, publisher, Addis Fortune, in an interview with MERSA Media Institute, February 2019.
15 Solomon Tesfaye, Director General, Ethiopian Broadcast Authority, in an interview with MERSA Media Institute, February 2019.
Political, Legal and Regulatory Pressure

Over the last decade, professional organizations and rights based civic groups in Ethiopia operated under stifling legal restrictions. The Charities and Societies Proclamation of 2009 dealt the Ethiopian civil society a crippling blow through mandatory funding and registration requirements. The government regulated the formation and function of professional and business associations, trade unions and charity and advocacy groups. These groups were required by law to finance their operations and projects with a 10 percent cap on foreign funding. To ask the civil society to raise 90 percent of their funding locally, in a country whose economy is driven by state control and where the majority of the population lives on less than dollar a day, was a death sentence. As resources dried up, the civic space shrunk.

Research on Ethiopia’s CSO law indicate that at the core of the rationale to close the civic space lies power consolidation by authoritarian rulers. The explanations are self-serving in the name of keeping foreign interests out of the nation’s domestic affairs. Regulatory pressures were not limited to journalist associations; Ethiopian Lawyers Association was split into pro- and anti-government stamping by regulators following a statement that denounced extrajudicial killings and arrest of opposition leaders and journalists in the aftermath of the 2005 elections. Government regulators had denied the Ethiopian Economic Association reregistration for three years.

Such legislative encroachments left journalist associations to rely on part-time volunteer workers. They saw their capacity severely diminished in the development of a vibrant, responsible, pluralistic and sustainable media sector.

SWOT Analysis of Journalist Associations in Ethiopia

Strengths

- Resilience to work under stifling environment
- Legal registration by some

Weaknesses

- Restrictive laws and government regulation
- Political pressure or co-optation
- Dysfunctional set up, unaccountable leadership and weak structure
- Lack of human resources and capacity
- Inactive membership and absence of recruitment strategies
- Foreign funding restrictions and lack of local funding
- Dependence on foreign funding and weak membership contributions

Opportunities

- Political will for sectorial reform and empowerment
- CSO law reform and lifting of restrictions
- Strong donor cooperation and support
- Increased number of journalists and media outlets
- Training and institutional support
- Knowledge transfer from diaspora returnees
- Partnership opportunities with the media council

Threats

- Polarization and political interference
- Rising trends to use media as political and ethnic instruments
- Old habits: institutional resistance from regulators
- Old habits: resistance from association leaders
- Lack of engagement from journalists

16 Debebe Habtegebriel, lawyer, media and civil society policy consultant, in an interview with MERSA Media Institute, March 2019.
Ethiopia is reforming its repressive laws as part of an effort to strengthen independent, robust, and responsible democratic institutions. In February 2019, Ethiopia’s parliament approved a revised draft law governing civil society organizations. The new law incorporates fundamental improvements that annul funding restrictions and regulatory hurdles on registration and membership. The new CSO law has laid basic building blocks for a system of participatory democracy where organized and informed civic groups can lead citizen participation in formulating public policy and safeguarding accountable governance.

**Major Improvements of the CSO Law**

- Lifting of foreign funding restrictions
- Lifting of membership eligibility by nationality and residence
- Lifting some regulatory and licensing powers of the Charities and Societies Agency
- Lifting of sanctions on foreign members and CSOs to engage in advocacy work with the exception of activities related to election observation, voter education and lobbying political parties, unless legally allowed.

Journalist associations and other CSOs have a lot to gain from these legislative improvements. Many of the national and special interest associations are amending their bylaws to re-register and resume their operations. Some journalists and editors are already forming working groups to deliberate on the formation of new associations. The political space in Ethiopia is opening up for civic engagement and the developments are critical for growth in the media sector. Amid the excitement, there are important considerations to be made so as not to repeat past mistakes and squander new opportunities.

**Need-Based Grassroots Drive: The Herculean Task**

Most of Ethiopia’s media associations are created from a top-down drive, in which a few professionals who get along get together, recruit passive members to get themselves elected and register the entity. Some founders have special political interests and affiliations while others focus on advocacy and capacity building on specialized issues such as gender, the environment, or other beat reporting.

In most journalist associations, membership is rather passive. The leaders assemble members for elections to fulfil legal obligations or when foreign funding is secured for training of journalists. Tamrat Gebregiorgis, a veteran publisher who used to be
a member of one of these organizations, said, “some associations take the names of conference and training participants and claim broad membership base.”

One long-time member of the Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association says he has never been an active member but participated in elections and trainings organized by the association. “I’ve never paid my membership fees. In fact, nobody asked,” he said. Another member said, “I don’t even know where to pay the fees. We don’t know where the office is located; do they even have one?”

This is not particularly the case with special interest and beat reporters’ associations. For example, the Ethiopian Environmental Journalists Association required candidates to have worked in the areas of environment, agriculture and food security. Membership applicants are given an associate status and given an opportunity to show their commitments to become full voting members.

The bottom line is that the rationale behind the creation of media associations should be defined by the need of members. Active participation of members is critical for the effective organization, articulation, and translation of sectoral and individual necessities into meaningful policy action. Internal accountability mechanisms such as separation of power, conflict of interest, audits and whistleblower clauses should be incorporated into bylaws and respected in practice. Procurement of goods and services and allocation of benefits to members require organizational manuals and transparent decision-making guidelines. Donor organizations and governments should place accountability at the top of funding requirements and commission independent monitoring and evaluation of project impact.

**Moving Forward: Consolidation vs. Fragmentation**

Out of eight media associations this study assessed, half have expired registration.

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“We don’t have resources to hold general assembly meetings.”

Wondossen Mekonnen, EFJA.

“Our president fled the country.”

Member, Ethiopian Photo Journalists Association

“I am not sure when our registration expired.”

ENJU’s leader in exile.

“Funding restrictions and government pressure shut us down.”

Founder, Environmental Journalists Association of Ethiopia.

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17 Tamrat Gebregiorgis, Managing Editor of Addis Fortune, in an interview with MERSA Media Institute, February 2019.
18 Issayas Mekuria and Melaku Demissie, EFJA members since the 90s, in an interview with MERSA Media Institute, March 2019.
19 Argaw Shinnie, founding director of EEJA, in an interview with MERSA Media Institute, March 2019.
Political pressure and funding restrictions had been stifling but lack of coordination and fragmentation amongst journalist associations has certainly made the impact severe. “I think plurality of associations is positive for media sector development, as long as the focus is on professionalism,” said Abel Wabella, a newspaper publisher and blogger who spent nearly two years behind bars. “The end would justify the means only if there is a strategic alliance between the different associations to advocate for common goals” Abel said.

Many journalists feel now is the time to form strong media associations that are respected by the media community for their commitment, integrity and independence from political influence. The drive for these changes should come from journalists, weather through the formation of new unions, merging of old associations, or creating a consortium of associations through some sort of agreed-upon structure. Organizing forums for such deliberations could play a key role in the road to success.

The grim state of Ethiopian Media Women Association, February 2019
Recommendations

Media Association Leaders

*It is recommended that media association leaders should:*

- Build institutional capacity and independence to defend freedom of speech and association through effective policy advocacy, protection of journalists, and enhancement of professional standards.

- Work to represent the interests of members and the overall improvement of the media sector. Remain politically engaged, influence policy but stay politically neutral.

- Create an internal accountability regime by revising bylaws and putting them to practice. Incorporate term limits, separation of powers, conflict of interest and whistleblower clauses to establish rule of law. Hold general assembly meetings and elections on time.

- Design membership recruitment strategies and assign volunteer groups to do the task. Inspire service and volunteerism through leading by example.

- Give members a reason to pay their contributions; collectively bargain for press credentials, access to information, and other interests that benefit journalists.

- Organize effectively and create strategic partnerships with other associations, the media council, governments, and donors.

- Build internal capacity before taking on projects to train others. Incorporate effective project management tools to successfully administer impactful media development projects.

- Design effective internal and external communications strategies for traditional and social media. Regularly update codes of conduct to make them relevant to journalistic practice.

- Engage in media literacy projects to create public awareness about the roles and responsibilities of the media.

Members

*Members of media associations are encouraged to:*

- Become active members, by paying their monthly contributions in order to sustain the association, and demand financial accountability from their leaders.

- Organize themselves under credible associations. Voice their concerns, demand accountability and transparency from elected leaders.

- Ensure term limits, audit reports, general assembly meetings, and elections are conducted according to bylaws governing the association.
• Take ownership of projects that advance the professional development goals of journalists and their safety through collective bargaining and advocacy.

• Abide by personal ethics, editorial guidelines of news organizations they work for, and their association’s code of conduct at all times.

**Government**

*It is recommended that government:*  

• Consolidates current media reform to clear hurdles hampering growth in the sector by designing implementation strategies. The government should involve media institutions as strategic partners to uphold the respect of constitutional freedoms of expression and information.

• Considers media institutions as independent monitors of governance accountability. By allowing the media to fulfil their role in the creation of informed and self-governing citizens, democratic governance can be insured.

• Allows the media civic space to thrive. Showing restraint from direct or indirect political interference on the workings of media associations is vital.

• Eases strict regulatory controls to pave the way for self-regulation.

• Considers further amendment of the CSO law to make allocation of funds by civic groups a non-binding honor system.

**Donors**

*It is recommended that donors:*  

• Seek partnerships with media businesses, think tanks, and academic institutions to help associations develop their internal capacity.

• Support media associations and assist in the development of structural changes that enhance efficiency, accountability, and financial sustainability of media associations.

• Require binding accountability standards in bylaws and in practice (audit reports, timely elections, independent monitoring and evaluation of projects, etc).

• Require bidding manuals for purchase of goods and services and a transparent decision making guideline.

• Refrain from pushing direct or indirect national interest and special interest agenda outside the advocacy scope of organizations they fund.
Attempts to Self-Regulate Under the Ethiopian Media Council

In January 2016, a decade-long joint endeavor by media professionals, associations and international partners culminated in the establishment of the Ethiopian Media Council (EMC). 22 A consortium of 19 media houses and journalist unions agreed to honor the code of conduct and abide by the organization’s bylaws. Since then, 29 legally registered state and private media organizations joined the EMC.

The EMC set out to provide industry-wide accountability and ethical practice through voluntary self-regulation of media institutions. Members pledged to abide by a publicly transparent accountability mechanism that includes a code of conduct and a complaints commission headed by ombudspersons. 23

Three years after the official establishment of the media council, the organization was still not legally registered. Amare Aregawi, the council’s president and publisher of the most influential biweekly newspaper in Ethiopia, is hopeful the organization will finally be registered now that the civil society law has been revised. 24

Legal and Regulatory Hurdles

The protracted journey to build industry consensus on the formation of the media council took place at the backdrop of repressive legal and regulatory frameworks that had devastating effects on sectoral growth and independence. Media associations had been severely weakened due to financial and regulatory limitations under the civil society law. Government crackdown on the private sector had diminished the number of publications from nearly 300 in the 90’s to barley a dozen over the past decade.

Constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and information had been eroded by laws and directives that govern the media and access to public information.

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21 The constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Article 29.
23 Ethiopian Media Council bylaws, Article 11 and 27.
The criminalization of defamation under the 2005 revised criminal code, and the broad use of the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation to stifle dissent sent many journalists to prison or exile. As a result, media organizations in Ethiopia started operating in a state of fear and self-censorship.

The media council aimed to do away with a regime of severe penalties granted by courts that lacked the independence to render true justice. By taking responsibility, investigating complaints and ruling on corrective measures on contested media reports, the council hoped to pave the way for self-regulation. “If only we were allowed register,” Tamrat Haile, a founding media owner said.25

Registering and assisting the media council to function independently as a sector wide self-regulatory body is a critical step to the development of professionalism. A well functioning council helps build credibility of the media industry, provides accountability and builds trust with the public. For a country like Ethiopia undergoing an ethnically charged political transition through the social media era where false information travels fact, associations can help create a media-literate public. Providing funding for project specific capacity building efforts of the council helps Ethiopia’s transition ensures long-term institutional success.

The Debate Over Representation

All interview and survey participants agree Ethiopia needs a media council. However, the majority26 of reporters and editors interviewed and surveyed for this study say the Ethiopian Media Council has practical representation issues to address. Four out of five current executive committee members are media owners. The remaining seat is taken by the president of the Ethiopian Journalists Association, representing only state media journalists. Out of 29 current members of the council, 26 are media institutions and three are media associations.

The issue of representation was raised during stakeholder consultation forums prior to the formation of the council. “We were told we can be represented by our associations since the council allows legally registered media institutions as members,” said Asrat Siyoum, editor of The Reporter newspaper.27

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethiopian Media Council Bylaws</th>
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<tr>
<td>Article 7 (2) Regular members include the following:</td>
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<td>a. Journalist associations</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Publishers and broadcasters</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. State and private journalism schools</td>
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The rationale for media owners and managing editors to take an active roles in the establishment of media councils comes on the basis that self-regulation can help them avoid lengthy trials and hefty fines. Under the Ethiopian law and the media environment at the time, they were the primary targets of lawsuits. But media self-regulation works effectively when practitioners trust the credibility of the media council and accept its codes of conduct.

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26 80% of respondents to interviews and participants of a sample survey.
“The media council was formed at a time the media faced repression. Six media houses were banned by government around the same time and many journalists and opinion writers were jailed or fled the country.”

“Media houses and fake associations privileged in the eyes of the authoritarian regime started the council. Pushing for the registration of such an entity would be sidelining others. So we should start a new process of for the formation of a council that has broad consensus. Otherwise, others will seek to form another council.”

“What I tell people who have a problem with the media council is two things: take the bylaws, read it. Take the code of conduct, read it. If you have substantive problem in there, it is good to discuss that, that is actually constructive. If you don’t have a problem with those two documents, then your problem is a personality problem.”

“People think that the media council is another form of an advocacy professional association. It is not.”

More than 10 journalists and editors interviewed for this study fear journalists could face sanctions through rulings passed by complaint investigative committees. This skepticism could subside if credible associations represent the interest of their members in the decisions of media councils. Establishing credible associations, as discussed in the previous chapter, requires active involvement of journalists to organize themselves.

Rate each function of a press council (on a scale of 1-5, 1 being very weak and 5 being very strong)

Sample survey conducted for this study in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, February and March 2019.
Journalists that have been recently released from prison and diaspora-based media institutions that are returning home feel left out and want to be a part of the council. The president of the council, Amare Aregawi said, any media organization that is legally registered has the right to sign up for membership “as long as they honor the code of conduct and our bylaws”.

Two bloggers from the Zone 9 group that were recently released from prison suggest a different approach. They are convinced a stakeholder discussion on the bylaws and code of conduct could end the debate. The bylaws could then be amended since the council is not legally registered yet.

“This attitude reminds me of the saying perfect is enemy of the good,” Tibebu Bekele, a journalism educator said. “Why discard the process that took a long time to mature and restart from zero? After all, it is possible to amend changes through participation in the council.”

EMC’s bylaws state a motion to amend the rules governing the council could be entertained if a quarter of its members sign a petition. Proposed amendments pass with a majority vote of the general assembly.

28 Befekadu Hailu, and Abel Wabella, Zone 9 bloggers, opinion editors, in an interview with MERSA Media Institute, February and March 2019.
30 Ethiopian Media Council bylaws, Article 36, Amending the council’s bylaws. (translation from Amharic)
THE MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY ECOSYSTEM IN ETHIOPIA
THE GOVERNMENT REGULATOR

“Freedom of expression and information can not be limited on the account of the content or effect of the point of view expressed.”

The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Article 29

“The authority shall have the powers and duties to ensure that the broadcasting service is conducted in such a manner that contributes to the proper social, economic, political and cultural development of the country.”

Broadcasting Service Proclamation No. 533/2007

Amending the structure and function of EBA

The Ethiopian Broadcast Authority (EBA) was established in 1999 to regulate broadcast operations in the country.31 There are three broadcast media ownership structures in Ethiopia: government, private and community. All broadcast operations are regulated by EBA, which was legally established to be autonomous. In practice, EBA serves as an arm to the government and is bureaucratic in its operations. This is mostly because the organization was originally setup to be accountable to the government; its director general and board were recommended by the Ministry of Information and appointed by the government.32

Power and duties of EBA33

- Issue, suspend and revoke broadcast service licenses and FM frequencies
- Determine the standard and types of equipment used for broadcasting and transition
- Investigate complaints and pass decisions on stories and other broadcast content
- If a broadcaster is criminally convicted, confiscate broadcast property and equipment

To put it in plain language, a federal government agency whose leaders are appointed by government spokespersons and are approved by the leader of the country has the right to issue or not to issue a broadcast license (Article 9). If you are lucky to get the license, the government tells you what equipment to buy and issues a certificate of approval for your purchases (Article 7). Then, if a government official or a member of the public complains about the content of your broadcasts, you are investigated by government officials who probably have never worked as journalists. At best, you get a pass, a notice or a hefty fine of USD350–3,500.

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31 Initially called the Ethiopian Broadcast Agency, officially changed to Ethiopian Broadcast Authority by the Broadcasting Service Proclamation No. 533/2007.
32 Broadcasting Service Proclamation No. 533/2007, Article 9 (2, 4).
33 Broadcasting Service Proclamation No. 533/2007, Articles 7 and 46.
(Article 45). At worst, a state official decides to press charges and a government-salaried prosecutor takes you to court under the 2005 criminal code—where you’ll be forced to defend your case before a court that is heavily influenced by the government. Finally, a guilty verdict puts you behind bars, giving the broadcast authority the legal mandate to confiscate all your broadcast equipment and property citing Article 46 of the Broadcasting Proclamation.

The Ethiopian media today are welcoming proposed legal reform of the broadcast proclamation to amend these overreaching legal mandates and inefficiencies in the practice of the government regulator. A working group of 15 journalists, lawyers, government officials and scholars has identified provisions in the Broadcasting Service Proclamation that contradict constitutional guarantees and other regulatory encroachments.

Verbatim: On reforming broadcast regulation

**SOLOMON TESFAYE**

Director General of Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority

“This office [EBA] does not have overreaching legal powers. The practice and interpretation of these mandates was an issue in the past. You may interpret the laws with their best intonations or stretch them beyond the legal provisions.”

“We are avidly working with the Attorney General’s office on the drafting of legal amendments. We have reached a consensus based on two joint consultation meetings.”

**SOLOMON GOSHU**

Chair of the media reform working group

“Defining content obligations of the broadcast media using terms such as ‘ensuring proper social, economic, political and cultural development of the country’ is a reflection of the government’s policy that viewed media as an instrument of proselytization.”

“The constitution clearly states expressions cannot be limited on the merits of their content. We are also looking into other provisions we believe are detrimental to free expression and sectoral growth.”

Do you think government should regulate the media?

- Yes: 80%
- No: 20%
Case Study: on Media Regulation
Kenya and South Africa

Kenya has a relatively vibrant and developed media landscape in Africa, but its media regulatory mechanism is not one to emulate. A self-regulating and independent Media Council of Kenya was established in 2004 by voluntary industry participants. The council was composed of media owners, journalist associations, relevant trade unions, consumer protection groups and journalism educators. However, the council became a statutory body in 2007 by government decree.

The co-regulatory legal arrangement brought government representatives into the council’s leadership and the executives were hired and paid by the state. The council was mandated to grant credentials for journalists, investigate complaints and issue and enforce codes of conduct.

Press freedom and human rights groups urged the government of Kenya to do away with government involvement in the council. Defiant of the calls for change, the government enacted the Media Council Act of 2013 that reasserted the duties and responsibilities of the council.

Subsequent reports by the State Department and Committee to Protect Journalists highlighted concerns stating that the law increased broad government oversight of media operations. It does this “by creating a complaints tribunal with expansive authority, including the power to revoke journalists’ credentials and levy debilitating fines,” states the 2014 State Department country report on Kenya.

Co-regulation of media could be seen as an infringement on the industry. Voluntary self-regulation could provide similar accountability results without resentment of enforcement mechanisms. South Africa has a functional regulatory mechanism independently co-regulated by a press council, a public advocate and a press appeals panel.

What kind of regulatory framework benefits media freedom and accountability in Ethiopia?

Sample survey conducted for this study in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, February and March 2019.
Recommendations

The Media Council

It is recommended that leaders of the media council:

• Open the stage for stakeholder forums to build consensus across industry leaders and practitioners. The council’s credibility is its currency in the face of those it serves—the public, government, civic groups, and most importantly journalists. Facilitate discussion forums focused on membership, the structure of the organization and awareness creation on the roles and responsibilities of the council and the sector. In order to show commitment to address criticism, these discussions should take place prior to registering the council.

• Understand that quality journalism is the rationale for the very existence of the council. Voluntary members of such an organization are institutions who are committed to the development of professionalism, high ethical standards and accountability. Others may have a different agenda.

• Maintain dialogue with the public by delegating independent ombudspersons to investigate complaints. It is suggested that the ombudspersons include respected members of the public, journalism professionals and academicians.

• Engage in media literacy projects that facilitate the public’s understanding of journalism.

• Create strategic partnerships with research and capacity building institutions, donors, civil society and government to address structural and internal capacity gaps in the media, its institutions and practitioners.

• Design a clear roadmap for partnerships to address capacity building needs of the organization and the sector. Voluntary self-regulation is a constant learning process for media institutions and journalists. Enforcement is elusive and can be perceived as infringement unless the development of professionalism in the sector is fostered through training, mentorship and editorial guidance.

• Learn from other African countries and nations that have similar political, socio-economic and cultural relevance to Ethiopian contexts. Self-regulation can be a painful and overwhelming process. It is a tremendous undertaking that takes time to mature; but it has been done before.

• Assist in the creation of independent journalist associations that represent the interest of journalists in the council.
**Government**

*It is recommended that branches of government:*

- Design a media policy strategy and engage in a positive dialogue with the sector and its leaders to implement policies, laws and regulations.

- Facilitate cross-functional cooperation and understanding between the media and government offices to eliminate institutional resistance and normative practices that hinder freedom of speech, information and association.

- Reform the government media regulatory regime and foster voluntary self-regulation. In doing so, the powers of the Ethiopian Broadcast Authority should be limited within the bounds of the constitution. EBA should be given autonomy by law and in practice and its leadership should be vetted and approved by parliament.

- Allow the media civic space to thrive. Permitting the sum of individual interests to be represented in responsible civil groups is a better strategy than mob-bargaining in political transitions.

**Donors**

*It is recommended that donors:*

- Help build the capacity of media institutions through technical, material and financial assistance.

- Assist in the development of a self-regulating media landscape. Support and facilitate awareness raising campaigns and media stakeholder consultation forums to build consensus and public confidence in the Ethiopian media council and journalist associations.

- Partner with the Ethiopian Media Council and credible journalist associations to facilitate training for journalists and media managers, and help build the internal capacity of these institutions to manage projects.

- Forge partnerships with media think tanks and research and academic institutions that can provide critical support for the development of media institutions.

- Provide assistance to design curriculums for hands-on professional development trainings of journalists, in-house media training facilities, as well as journalism schools.
Professional development trainings for Ethiopian journalists take place at odd locations: a Rift Valley vacation destination, a fancy hotel in Addis or a foreign embassy compound. Participants sit in conference rooms and listen to rectors of academia lecture about theories or foreign journalists talk about how journalism is practiced in their world. Participants are treated to a nice buffet lunch, paid per diem and offered accommodation if the training is out of town. It is difficult to get participants to attend unless per diem is offered.

A foreign media support group or a donor government advertises a funding opportunity, usually open for non-profit or academic institutions, a winning entry is picked, and the training process repeats itself. One newspaper publisher is so fade up with the lack of relevant and innovative journalism training that he decided to set up his own in-house training facility, allocating one percent of his profits to finance it. “Now we can experiment with new ways of doing things that best serve our needs,” he said.34

This is not a reproach to much needed local or foreign funding for media development in Ethiopia. Formal training on the principles of journalism, media law and techniques of reporting and writing are important and should be supported. However, these capacity building initiatives should be driven by the need of local media and address practical gaps in journalism training and reporting for mainstream and digital media. The likelihood of making successful impact is higher when the media marketplace and local information needs dictate the content and purpose of journalism training. This report explores innovative models for journalism training that open avenues for local entrepreneurs, media training and research institutions, as well as in-house trainings facilities in Ethiopia. Such interventions ensure the creation of a robust and sustainable media training sphere that is not entirely dependent on donor support.

Model 1: Media Labs
Experimental Grounds for Beat Reporting

Journalism schools, non-profit media initiatives and private entrepreneurs are launching media labs to nurture innovative and collaborative grounds for journalism training and new media storytelling. At the core of these new media projects lies an interdisciplinary union of ideas, technology, local knowledge, institutions and a market need.

Media labs are project-specific initiatives hosted by education centers, non-profit
media think tanks, or a collaboration of media outlets to address local information needs of communities. They can also be stand-alone social enterprises or non-profit ventures.

Graphic designers, media platform developers, reporters, editors and mentors come together to experiment with innovative storytelling techniques on specific beats they cover or are interested in. They participate in a practical curriculum that is designed to enhance their technical knowledge, use of technology and platform-specific storytelling abilities. They learn by doing and benefit from the diverse and cross-functional composition of their media lab fellows.

In March 2019, a group of 19 European media outlets from 13 countries launched a collaborative project called FactCheckEU to provide accurate reporting of European parliamentary elections to citizens. This came in the aftermath of misinformation campaigns by foreign groups that alarmed EU leaders ahead of the polls. Traditional and digital media organizations quickly moved to train journalists and allocate resources to set up a platform that engages with citizens across mainstream and social media.

Harvard University launched the Nieman Journalism Lab in 2008 to “promote and elevate the standards of journalism” through creative storytelling and innovative platform development for the digital age.

Practical on the job training and skills sharing partnerships are taking root in Africa. Code for Africa, a leading open data advocacy group, is setting up data journalism training labs in several Sub-Saharan African countries. Participants receive training on how to access local data repositories, analyze the information and report for their news organizations. Another group based in Kenya is partnering with Google News to bring digital and traditional news reporters together to work on joint storytelling projects.

This bottom-up drive for journalism training allows news organizations to create demand based on specific challenges that require innovative solutions. It calls for collaboration with media technology groups, platform developers, think tanks and educators, and private and public sectors. It can help create a sustainable marketplace of ideas and solutions.

**Model 2: Digital Integration of Newsrooms**

Journalism has evolved; its platforms have converged into a digital marketplace where information is shared and received in integrated social and mainstream avenues. Media business models have been fundamentally transformed in many parts of the world through the digitization of content production and distribution. The present day media landscape requires journalists and media houses to tell stories on social and digital media platforms alongside traditional broadcast and print outlets.

“Mainstream media could have capitalized on opportunities presented in the digital space, but media leaders and their partners did not make initial investments to train and equip newsrooms,” said Asrat Seyoum, the editor of The Reporter newspaper. The result according to him is a social media landscape that is dominated by “content aggregators, fake news groups and activists”.


The majority of Ethiopian media outlets don’t have a digital strategy, much less a round-the-clock monitoring of social media metrics for audience engagement and feedback. “Show me the money,” said Tamrat Gebregiorgis. “As a media business manager, I have to see the return on investment on social media. Even if the journalist in me wants to experiment, my investors demand profit.”

**Incentives**

Digital distribution and consumption trends have transformed advertising revenue streams. Online advertising has democratized and opened borders for media to compete in the world of internet advertising.

Ethiopian media could strategize to benefit from Google and Facebook advertising revenue streams as well as other regional and local digital markets. Digital marketing provides some opportunity; the challenge is how to assist Ethiopian media build capacity to meet the growing demand for news and information on multiple platforms.

The media sector in Ethiopia lacks the financial capacity to buy basic video recording equipment among other things. To build in-house training modules that help journalists tell visual stories and craft storytelling prototypes for mobile, web, broadcast and print is going to be a difficult feat to accomplish. The government is considering lifting hefty import duty taxes on broadcast and digital media equipment, which could help ease the burden.

There are close to five million Facebook subscribers in Ethiopia. This provides market incentive to invest in social media reporting. In addition to advertising revenue, building brand recognition among users—mostly the youth—could be a good engagement strategy that pays off in the long term. Beyond purely economic incentives, the spread of misinformation and fake news on social media should drive traditional media to reassert itself on these platforms.

However, these incentives don’t generate revenue in the short-term. Local advertisers are reluctant to commit to digital advertising, making initial investment by media owners more challenging.

Supporting capacity development for digital integration of the Ethiopian media is recommended and has strong potential for success in achieving sustainability. One way of strengthening capacity could be to invest in media lab projects for platform-specific social reporting. Such collaborative ventures, coupled with investments on equipment, could prove to be seeds placed in fertile soil.

**Model 3: In-House Training Facilities**

Ethiopia lacks institutions that emphasize specialized, practical and technical skills training essential for journalists to gather, analyze and disseminate information for traditional and digital platforms. Media houses, especially those located in regional cities and towns, lack institutional knowledge and human and financial capacity to facilitate in-house education and mentorship of journalists that can enable them to function in emerging technologies and new media markets.
The rationale for this endeavor is to help build in-house capacity and develop knowledge retention mechanisms that can help maintain a pool of talented media practitioners who improve the quality of institutions and diversity of journalism.

This is a custom-made training model as Tibebu Bekele, a journalism educator who runs an in-house training facility for Addis Fortune described it. “We are a business newspaper, so the trainings are tailored to our need. We introduce participants to our editorial process, codes of ethics, in-house technology and most importantly, the craft of business and economic reporting.”

**A Case Study**

In September 2018, an experimental joint project between MERSA Media Institute and Independent News & Media group that publishes Addis Fortune, ran a two-week long media lab workshop on financial reporting for the digital age. The curriculum was locally produced and an affordable mobile journalism (MOJO) technology was imported. Participants learned by doing and from briefings by industry leaders on the functions and legal responsibilities of financial institutions in Ethiopia.

The findings from this practical training were encouraging. Affordable mobile telephone technology was used and each participant produced reports for print, web and social media. However, further curriculum development, availability of skilled trainers, and lack of funding were identified as the main challenges to upscaling the pilot.

**Model 4: Specialized Journalism Education**

Formal journalism education is a recent undertaking in Ethiopia. In 1996, Ethiopian Mass Media Training Institute started offering broadcast and print journalism training for state media practitioners. Addis Ababa and Bahir Dar universities pioneered an all-inclusive journalism program for their students starting 2004. Scores of public and private universities followed suit.35

Journalism schools are not adequately resourced to teach practical journalism courses. They don’t have media labs equipped for print, broadcast and online journalism training. Most journalism professors are academicians who have never practiced out of the classroom setting; hence, lacking practical experience to run workshops that enable students to build reporting, writing, editing and news presentation skills.

Long-term efforts to improve journalism standards in Ethiopia should focus on improvements at the source—journalism schools. The first step should be changing school curriculums to develop hands-on journalism workshops that help students build reporting skills and familiarize them with new technology and equipment. Creating media labs run by professional journalists that produce content for online, print and broadcast media is instrumental.

To make these recommendations and ideas viable, coordinated investment from government, donors and media outlets is required.

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SWOT ANALYSIS OF MEDIA TRAINING IN ETHIOPIA

**STRENGTHS**
- Availability of journalism schools
- Demand for trained journalists
- Availability of operational media outlets

**WEAKNESSES**
- Lack of understanding of the roles of journalists in society
- Outdated training models for journalists
- Theoretical journalism training in schools
- Lack of practical in-house training facilities and curriculum for media
- Slow technology, knowledge transfer and adaptation to digital media
- Lack of investment in infrastructures that support journalism education
- Absence of cross-disciplinary media training and research labs
- Weak associations, absence of standards and lack of ethics education
- High rates of attrition
- Dependence on foreign funding and lack of sustainable funding models

**OPPORTUNITIES**
- Increasing number of journalists and media outlets
- Development of new and sustainable training models
- Availability of technology and equipment due to media policy reform
- Online advertising revenue
- CSO law reform, which lifts funding restrictions
- Potential for local and international media civil society to emerge
- Donor coordination and support

**THREATS**
- The vicious circle of low wages, attrition and lack of experienced professionals
- Lack of innovation, business-as-usual attitude by the sector and partners
- Growing trends of journalists becoming political and ethnic instruments
- Media reform implementation setbacks
- Dwindling advertising revenue
Recommendations

Media Outlets

*It is recommended that media outlets:*

- Design digital integration strategies for newsrooms. Adjust business models to adapt and migrate to a digitally converging media market. This does not require hiring new staff; today's journalists are multimedia reporters.
- Create in-house training and knowledge management structures that facilitate digital transition and consolidate institutional knowledge retention and sharing.
- Create partnerships with external institutions and experts that have local knowledge and experience to help in the creation of in-house training structures, specialized curriculums and practical workshops.
- Invest in mobile journalism (MOJO) training. It is cost effective and practical for sound and video reporting on broadcast and digital media, and editing and live broadcasting on social and traditional media.
- Design social media and digital advertising strategies and enter a new market.
- Grow and engage audiences on social media platforms. Facebook is the leading social media platform in Ethiopia. Success on these platforms requires the creation of timely and specialized content that is native to devices and platforms.
- Invest in audience research and tracking and monitoring of content across platforms. Stay abreast of trends and advances in media device and software technology.
- Overall strategy should focus on creating and adapting visual stories for mobile; engaging audiences where they are, especially the youth; driving traffic to websites; and generating income.

Government

*It is recommended that government institutions:*

- Build the capacity of journalism schools by improving school infrastructure and revising curriculums to make them relevant to industry needs and media market trends.
- Create partnerships with sector and non-sector actors to improve the quality and standard of journalism training.
- Engage in positive dialogue with the sector and its leaders to implement policy, laws and regulations.
• Invest in innovative research that can support independent media capacity building institutions. This can go a long way towards ensuring sustainable growth in the industry.

• Design a social media strategy that allows media outlets to serve as fact checkers. Empower media civil society to create watchdog platforms to debunk fake news, report hate speech to social media administrators and audiences, and instill media literacy in the society.

Donors

It is recommended that donors:

• Support professional media development efforts in the country through the creation of education centers, media outlets and robust civil society.

• Evaluate old models and assist in the introduction of applicable new models that ensure sustainable growth in the industry.

• Engage with media owners, academic institutions and think tanks to identify needs for intervention, with media institutions at the forefront of this process. Ensure these partnerships lead to the development of local institutions that foster the growth of media capacity. Local ownership generates a problem-solving entrepreneurial spirit.

• Assist in the development of new strategies for marketing and diversified advertising revenue streams for Ethiopian media. This is one key factor in achieving sustainability.

• With all due considerations, refrain from sponsoring training sessions held at hotels and resort towns. First, editors don’t send their good reporters away from the job due to staff shortages. Secondly, it introduces a culture of dependence and wrong incentives, especially when journalists are paid to be trained.
Conclusion

The findings from this report show that the media landscape in Ethiopia is characterized by weak institutions, political endorsement and shortage of resources to provide much needed comprehensive coverage of current affairs with proper context and analysis.

Public media in Ethiopia operate under the shadow of state and regional government control. Laws framing the purposes of public broadcasting prioritize the media’s allegiance to political parties, and their policies rather than the community. The findings of this report highlight the need for structural and regulatory reform of public media; its mission being to inform and engage citizens on issues affecting their lives. Placing full editorial control in the hands of journalists and managers that are not politically appointed builds credibility for the public media, which is currently perceived as an organ of the state.

According to Ethiopian laws, political parties are not allowed to own media outlets. However, political party affiliated media are flourishing. The instrumentalist agenda of using the media as a tool for political propaganda and mobilizing popular support is on the rise. Added to the mix is the return of dissident satellite TV and radio stations from exile. These stations are affiliated with different political groups who often have contradictory visions for the country.

The private media has been systematically dismantled by years of government repression through legal, regulatory and state security intimidation and harassment. Government crackdown and indirect economic sanctions on the private media had forced many to cease operations.

Recent political changes in Ethiopia are opening unprecedented opportunities to strengthen democracy and civil rights. Led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed since April 2018, the new government has demonstrated the will to liberalize the media and its key institutions. The reforms provide an opportunity to strengthen an independent media sector that is free, professional, self-regulating, and financially sustainable.

On Journalist Associations

The pillars of a functioning media landscape are journalist associations and civil society. In February 2019, Ethiopia’s parliament approved a revised draft law governing civil society organizations. The new law incorporates fundamental improvements that annul funding restrictions and regulatory hurdles on registration and membership. The new CSO law lays basic building blocks for a system of participatory democracy where organized and informed civic groups can lead citizen participation in formulating public policy and safeguarding accountable governance.

Most journalist associations in Ethiopia suffer from a credibility crisis due to state interference, politically co-opted leadership and other accountability issues that alienate their constituency.
Associations created to advocate for the protection of journalists failed to show solidarity with journalists and writers, especially throughout the past decade when Ethiopia ranked top amongst the worst jailers of journalists by international media advocacy groups.

The overwhelming majority of respondents interviewed for this study said they have decided not to be members of journalist associations in Ethiopia because they do not feel these groups represent their interests or show solidarity. The bottom line is that the rationale behind the creation of media associations should be defined by the need of members. Active participation of members is critical for the effective organization, articulation and translation of sectoral and individual necessities into meaningful policy action.

Internal accountability mechanisms, such as separation of power, conflict of interest, audits and whistleblower clauses, should be incorporated into Ethiopian media associations’ bylaws, and practiced with respect. Procurement of goods and services and allocation of benefits to members require organizational manuals and transparent decision-making guidelines. Donor organizations and governments should place accountability at the top of funding requirements and commission independent monitoring and evaluation of project impact.

**Self-Regulation Under the Ethiopian Media Council**

Registering and assisting the Ethiopian Media Council to function independently as a sector wide self-regulatory body is a critical step to the development of professionalism. A well functioning council helps build credibility of the media industry, provides accountability and builds trust with the public. Ethiopia is undergoing an ethnically charged political transition in the era of social media where false information travels fast. Media associations can play a big role in creating a media literate public that sifts information they choose to digest.

All interview and survey participants for this study agree Ethiopia needs a media council. However, the majority of reporters and editors interviewed and surveyed for this report say the Ethiopian Media Council has practical representation issues to address. Four out of five current executive committee members are media owners. Journalists that have been recently released from prison and diaspora-based media institutions that are returning home feel left out and want to be a part of the council. Its president, Amare Aregawi, said that any media organization that is legally registered has the right to sign up for membership “as long as they honor the code of conduct”. However, the newcomers have a different idea—to initiate a new process that begins with a media stakeholder discussion, since the council has not been legally registered yet.

This report recommends creating stakeholder discussion forums to build consensus across industry leaders and practitioners in order to boost credibility. Discussion forums should focus on the structure of the organization, membership representation and creation of awareness on the roles and responsibilities of the council and the sector. It is recommended that this should be done prior to registering the council so as to show good faith in addressing criticism.
New Models for Media Capacity Building

Raising the overall quality and standard of journalism in Ethiopia requires new and bold models for capacity building projects. It is vital that practical gaps in journalism training and reporting for mainstream and digital media are assessed through need-based, local media-led processes. The likelihood of making a successful impact is higher when local information needs and the media marketplace dictate the content and purpose of journalism training.

This report explores innovative models for journalism training that open avenues for local entrepreneurs, media training and research institutions, as well as in-house trainings facilities for Ethiopian media. Such partnerships ensure the creation of a sustainable and innovative media training marketplace that is not entirely dependent on donor support.

Supporting capacity development for digital integration of the Ethiopian media is recommended and has strong potential for success in achieving financial sustainability. One way of strengthening capacity could be to invest in media lab projects for platform-specific social reporting. Such collaborative ventures, coupled with investments on equipment, could prove to be seeds placed on a fertile ground.

There are close to five million Facebook subscribers in Ethiopia. This provides market incentive to invest on digitally integrated newsrooms. In addition to boosting advertising revenue, building brand recognition among users—mostly the youth—could be a good engagement strategy that pays off in the long term. Beyond purely economic incentives, the spread of misinformation and fake news on social media should drive traditional media to reassert itself on these platforms.

Footnotes:
1 Meseret Atalay, president of EJA, in an interview with MERSA Media Institute, February 2019 (A claim that is contested).
2 Ethiopian Media Council bylaws, Article 7, Membership. (translation)
3 Befekadu Hailu, opinion editor, Addis Maleda newspaper, in an interview with MERSA Media Institute, February 2019.
4 Interview with MERSA Media Institute, February 2019.
Henok is an Ethiopian-American journalist and media educator. For the past 15 years, he’s worked as an international reporter, media developer and creator and manager of youth broadcasts for VOA and BBC. He is the founder and executive director of MERSA Media Institute—a non-profit think tank that works to create vibrant, responsible and independent media and education centers through research, capacity building and institutional support in Africa.

As a media educator, Henok has extensive experience in designing media training projects funded by U.S. government agencies in partnership with the Broadcasting Board of Governors and others. In Nigeria he designed and implemented a training on business and entrepreneurial journalism for young reporters in Kano, where the terror group Boko Haram was active and destructive. In Ethiopia and Kenya, he conducted humanitarian reporting workshops.

Henok served as an executive fellow at U.S. House of Representatives providing policy briefs and assistance in the drafting of legislation on Africa.

He worked as a reporter and host of news magazine shows in multiple languages for an African audience in Ethiopia and Washington, D.C.

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About MERSA Media Institute

MERSA Media Institute is a nonprofit media policy think tank. We work to help create vibrant, responsible and independent media, professional unions and education centers through research, capacity building and institutional support in Africa.

We are based in Washington, D.C. and work in sub-Saharan Africa, with particular emphasis on Ethiopia. We believe free and independent media are lifelines to the development of peaceful, prosperous, and democratic societies.

Mission

MERSA Media Institute works to support objective journalism and strengthen media institutions to be self-governing, sustainable and committed to inform the public on issues that affect their lives. We value and work towards the development of professionals and institutions that have strong ethics and public interest, and are devoted to create accountable governance.

Theory of Change

Our media research and training partnerships are designed to create stable, peaceful and prosperous nations where diversity of views, identities and interests are respected and engrained in robust public discourse.

How We Do That

We provide data-driven research to equip policy makers with information to help them make sound policy decisions in setting media regulatory frameworks and legal reforms. We build the capacity of journalists through training; conduct business sustainability studies for media houses; and help create and develop press councils, unions and codes of ethics.

Why We Do It

We are a team of journalists, educators, researchers and knowledge management experts who are passionate about the role of independent media in the development of informed and self-governing citizens.
Media Development for a Thriving Democracy

HOW WE DO THAT

We provide data-driven research that enables policy-makers understand and take action in facilitating enabling regulatory frameworks and reforms. We build the capacity of journalists through trainings, we conduct business sustainability studies for media houses, we help in the creation and development of press councils, unions and codes of ethics.

WHY WE DO IT

We are a team of journalists, educators, researchers, and knowledge management experts who are passionate about the role of independent media in the development of informed citizens that are self-governing. We believe free and independent media are lifelines to the development of peaceful, prosperous and democratic societies.

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