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**Reflections on Media Freedom in Pre and Post Political Reforms in Ethiopia: Practitioners' Perspective**Tesfaye Tufa<sup>1\*</sup> and Melisew Dejene<sup>2</sup>

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**Abstract**

Media freedom is crucial for the growth of democracy, particularly in developing nations where democracy is still in its infancy. Ethiopia has recognized media freedom in the constitution, as well as other press proclamations that had been amended at various periods. The country has ratified international media laws to such an end. There is evidence, however, that Ethiopia's media right to free expression has been violated on several occasions. Therefore, this study assessed the status of media in the pre and post-reform period (after the coming of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali to power in 2018) as reflected by the practitioners. We held one-on-one in-depth interviews with twelve purposively selected media practitioners working for both government and privately-owned media based on their experience of doing journalism in Ethiopia. The views of media practitioners were qualitatively analyzed. The study's findings demonstrated that in the post-reform period, some of the obstacles that existed prior to the reform were changed, and media freedom was better safeguarded in relative terms<sup>3</sup>. The study recommends that media professionals should work within the present legislative framework, which, while imperfect, should not make their relationship with the government inimical.

**Key Words:** /Abiy Ahmed Ali/Democracy/Media Freedom/ Media Practitioners/Post political reform/

**1. Introduction**

The 1995 FDRE Constitution and other laws included broad provisions for media freedom in Ethiopia. According to Skjerdal (2012a), the period after EPRDF marks a significantly different arena of the press in Ethiopia in terms of formal press policy and space for media independence. There was hardly any free press or freedom for political dissent on the ground despite the constitutions provided it in theory. The government had monopolistically owned the media in the past over two decades. These stifled the media institutions from entertaining diverse opinions and limited the public from reflecting their views freely. Many incidents reflect that the space for media freedom or independence in Ethiopia has been limited. The Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime, which is now, arguably, transformed into Prosperity Party

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<sup>3</sup> When this manuscript was submitted to EJSSLS for a possible publication; it is worth noting that we witnessed many adversities between the media and the government then after.

(PP), has jailed several journalists during the pre-reform period, while the constitution and successive laws provided for media freedom; the government did not uphold these rights in practice (Tura, 2007). The government started using the press law, since 1992, which is now defunct and used it to intimidate journalists. This was followed by the demise of the then newly established media outlets and a wave of journalists in exile (Shimelis, 2000).

The media provides the platform for a variety of voices to be heard. It serves as the public's watchdog, educator, and entertainer, and is critical to the growth of democracy. However, just a year after the EPRDF took control, the government has suppressed media independence and access to information. Journalists have suffered persecution, harassment, and torture for a longer period while attempting to report on vital problems. Stremlau (2011) stated that “despite the initial phase of freedom in the early 1990s, a gradual restriction of media space has occurred; dozens of journalists have been imprisoned over the years. The regime has kept the state media firmly under party control, rather than allowing independent media to emerge.” Due to this, the people and the governing body were in an antagonistic relationship prior to the election of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali. According to the Human Rights report, the government exerts tight control over the media's landscape, making it difficult for societies to obtain information that is free of government bias. Journalists have been exercising their freedom of expression under several challenges (HRW, 2018). The government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, however, implemented media reforms after taking office. Journalists in prison, for example, had been released, and prohibited media outlets have been reinstated. The Post-Political reform situation, however, has not yet been subject to academic scrutiny. This study is not interested in analyzing the impacts of those reforms, as the time is short for such an endeavor. Nevertheless, we are interested in examining media practitioners' opinions on the state of media freedom in Ethiopia following the political reforms, which has not been assessed by investigators, to the knowledge of the researchers. The practitioners reflect on the post-political reform situation comparing it with that of the pre-reform practices.

## 2. Review of Related Literature

### 2.1 Conceptualizing Media Freedom

Media freedom refers to the right of journalists to report on, comment on, and criticize public problems without fear of retaliation from authorities, except in cases where it is prohibited by law. Dennis and Merrill (1996) defined the freedom of the media as the right to communicate ideas, opinions, and information without government restraint. They state that the main purpose of media freedom is to create an informed electorate that can make decisions about public affairs (Dennis and Merrill, 1996). The now banned Transitional Government Press Proclamation 34/1992, article 2 (1) states that freedom of the press is the right of citizens to launch any establishment of mass media to publish and distribute without censorship and any restriction of a similar nature, including freedom from prior restraint and liability after publication.

The free flow of information because of the recognition of media freedom has myriad functions: Firstly, information is necessary to make rational judgments. This means that democratic decision-making on the one hand and public ability realistically to perceive and respond to the world, on the other hand, requires widespread availability of information of general interest (Gene, 1998). Secondly, freedom of information is considered the key to world peace and its totalitarian system because the evils of propaganda will highly decrease if the concerned people are given all the information necessary to evaluate it for itself (*Ibid*). The media makes it simple and efficient for the government, lawmakers, and public figures to interact with citizens. The media, as a medium for ideas and information and as an agenda setter, must be able to offer a variety of viewpoints and work freely to be an effective contributor to the democratic process. The media is crucial for informing and rallying citizens to participate in the democratic process and to contribute to the country's growth. What makes the freedom of media and expression fundamental is that, when this very right is enjoyed properly, some other rights by default are highly likely to be respected (Puddephatt, 2011).

The media have served as a watchdog, exposing officials' wrongdoings and serving as an adversary to the ruling party. As a result, permitting the government to regulate the media jeopardized media freedom by enacting laws that penalized journalists who published stories critical of the rulers. The Ethiopian media laws have not created a better working atmosphere to the journalists, making them free to report the stories by incorporating diverse ideas from different sources. For instance, Freedom of Mass Media and Access to Information (Proclamation No. 590/2008 now repealed and replaced), and the Anti-Terrorism Law (Proclamation No. 652/2009 now repealed and replaced) can be mentioned as some of the draconian legislations that limited the journalists' active participation in the media (IMS, 2018). In the post-reform context, the Government of Ethiopia has revised the press law and others, hopefully, aiming to create a better media situation while we were writing this article.

## 2.2 Government-Media Relationship

The government and media institutions could have a mutually beneficial partnership. The attitude of media institutions to government is partly defined by degrees of interference, which are in turn defined by the terms of regulation for a given media industry. It is also partly defined by the ideological position of the given media business, or even their proprietors towards the state's rights, within their idea of the media-audience relationship (Burton, 2005). When we talk about the relationship between the media and government, we are talking about a relationship that is illustrated by 'a mutual need of politicians to appear in the media to have a platform for their positions', and that of the media 'to have the politicians appear so that they might attract an audience by having access to authority figures' (Burton, 2005). Kumar and Jones (2005), argue that on the surface, the government-media relationship is an 'acrimonious' one and the ideally thought 'cooperation' is far from what actually exists in the 'operating mode'. They assert that this relationship is multilayered in that: (1) 'government officials and news organizations spend a great deal of time and resource making use of the presence of the other, even if there is mutual mistrust of motives and actions, (2) there are personal and institutional relations that define the conduct of how the two sides relate to and consider each other, and (3) 'the continuing character of the relationship is based on the consistent nature of the information needs, and the institutional responses, of both partners'. According to Kumar and Jones (2005), the personal relationship is that between government officials and reporters, which appears to be aggressive in that they are sometimes critical of one another. However, they explain, the institutional relationship between media organizations and the government is continuous in which cooperation between the two prevails with the intent of getting the most out of it.

In addition to their function of carrying information between the government and the public, the media influence political decisions and functions by disclosing what officials usually prefer to hide from the public and by monitoring the government and other governmental political institutions' power. Due to this watchdog function, the media are considered the fourth estate added to the traditional three organs of government that are the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary. Kumar and Jones (2005) see four central ways in which the 'combined' and 'singular' media can influence the government, and the process of governing it follows as well. First, the media inform the public of the actions of officials elected to rule. Second, the information provided influences the workings of the government, for the public would act according to the information. Third, through the works disseminated to the wide public, the media inform people of the deeds of other governmental institutions. Fourth, the 'information provided by the media serve as an early warning system for government officials of problems they may not have recognized or issues coming to the surface that they did not see coming.

The government's regulatory influence on the media has a negative impact on the behavior of media organizations, since it obstructs freedom of expression and the media. However, some controls on the media that are designed to ensure the protection of human rights have had good impact. The relationship between the government and the media in Ethiopia has been hostile as the government deliberately repressed the media.

During the EPRDF, for example, the relationship between the private print media and the government was described as "suspicious" (Melisew, 2013).

### 2.3 Theoretical Framework

A discussion of the theories surrounding press freedom or media freedom begins with a reference to the Cold War era, when four theories of the press (Authoritarian, Libertarian, Soviet, and Social responsibility), according to Siebert et al. (1984), came to fore. It also includes later theories developed, Democratic Participation Theory and Development Theory. Among these theories, Authoritarian and Social responsibility were selected to underpin the finding of this study. Authoritarian Theory of the press, in the words of Siebert et al. (1984), is where the government has absolute power and control over the press. This includes ownership, content, license, and the use of mass media. The authoritarian state requires direct governmental control of the mass media, and the media are not allowed to print or broadcast anything, which could undermine the established authority. Huang (2009) argues that free media is also costly to authoritarian regimes.

A relatively free and credible media can inform citizens under an incompetent regime that their grievances are widely shared and coordinated in challenging the regime. The other theory used in this study is the Social Responsibility Theory of the press, a name inspired by the ideas of the U.S. Commission on Freedom of the Press in the late 1940s. In this model, the press is free, but it has certain obligations to society that can be expressed in terms of "truth, accuracy, objectivity, and balance." According to Siebert et al. (1984), the goal of the Social responsibility model is to diversify the media, reflecting "the diversity of society as well as providing access to various points of view." As opposed to the Libertarianism Theory of the press, the principle in social responsibility is to provide an entrance to different mass media to minority groups. The journalist is accountable to his/her audience as well as to the government. In illustration, the theory puts the mass media and the government at the same level, signifying an interaction where both parties are allowed to criticize each other. McQuail (1994) emphasizes that the media have obligations to society. The news media should be truthful, accurate, fair, and objective to the extent that 'objectivity' is attainable. In conflict with libertarian ideals, the government has the right to intervene in the public interest under some circumstances. Therefore, this study deals with the media situations in the pre and post-political reform context, and these theories better serve that purpose.

### 3. Methodology of the Study

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. In this research tradition, there is a preference "for a contextual understanding so that behavior is to be understood in the context of meaning systems employed by a particular group or society" (Bryman, 2004). As the study is mainly focused on analyzing the media practitioners' views to the situation of media freedom in the pre and post-political reform context in Ethiopia, qualitative approach better serves that purpose. The sampling technique used in this study was purposive sampling. According to Morse (1994), purposive sampling helps find informants who have the available knowledge and experience that the researchers/ investigators needed. We adopted a variant of purposive sampling known as stakeholder sampling as it helps "identify who the major stakeholders are who are involved in designing, giving, receiving, or administering the program or service being evaluated, and who might otherwise be affected by it" (Given, 2008). We involved twelve media practitioners who have better knowledge and experience on the situation of media in Ethiopia. The study participants were purposively selected from three broadcast media (one government and two private), and three print media (one government owned and two private). One of the broadcast media involved in the study is now banned in Ethiopia. Data collected through in-depth interviews from these informants were presented qualitatively and analyzed thematically.

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<sup>4</sup> When this manuscript was submitted to EJSSLS for a possible publication

All of the interviews were conducted in Addis Ababa from 03-25 March 2019. The discussions were held in Amharic and Afan Oromo. The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The research passed through a rigorous review at Hawassa University's Department of Journalism and Communication where the first author presented and defended his proposal, then his thesis under the supervision of the second author, and its validity was maintained accordingly through experts' comments. As a methodological limitation, the authors do not claim for the generalizability of the findings. First, we adopted a purposive sampling strategy. Second, the reflections are confined to the onset of the political reforms (the honeymoon period). Hence, the conclusions drawn here are tentative and indicative of what needs to be done for the future of journalism in Ethiopia.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

This part presents the finding of the study and the analysis. It discusses the practices of media freedom in the post political reforms in Ethiopia. The analysis is based on the views of media practitioners along with different studies conducted in the area.

##### 4.1 The Media in the Pre-reform Period

The pre reform situation of media in Ethiopia was marked with the violations of press laws, which restricted journalists' freedom of expression and media freedom in general (Ross, 2010; Melisew, 2013). Ethiopia has been described as a media-unfriendly country for more than two decades before the political reform was introduced in 2018. Different researches on media development show that the media in general and the private press in particular suffered due to limited access to public information. The political pressures have been evident in the media landscape of the country. Many private news outlets were shutdown, their editors were arrested, and many journalists fled to other countries. Those remaining in the country were working under fear (Freedom House, 2019).

However, reports indicate that journalists in Ethiopian jails have been released following the coming of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power. Because of changes introduced by the new leadership, in 2019, the country has improved its ranks in the world freedom index moving up from 150 to 110 (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). Informant-1, Deputy chief executive officer (CEO) of one of the broadcast media involved in the study, reflected on the reforms achieved and claimed, "Prior to the reform, the media were under the influence of a few government officials who lacked professional knowledge. The media now have a largely open environment in which to operate in order to expose government flaws and ensure public accountability. There are officials who force media institutions to adjust the angle of a story in their favor prior to the reform. That hegemony no longer exists in the post-reform era." (Personal interview, March 04, 2019)

***Practitioners' reflections on media legislations.*** During the interview the practitioners raised concerns related to access to information, fines, government intervention in media freedom, freedom and professionalism in the media, and media financial capacity.

***Access to information.*** Despite the fact that the proclamations amended to protect the right to freedom of the press contain provisions that provide journalists with a wide range of access to information, media practitioners interviewed for the current study expressed concern that the law was not implemented on the ground. Informant- 1 argues, "even though the freedom of journalists to access government activity is expressively stated in the press legislation, the government officials refuse to provide the public with updated information. One of the most serious difficulties facing our media, both [the] private and public, is a lack of access to information." (Personal interview, March 04, 2019) Similarly, another informant from the same organization, Informant-2 said, "in their pursuit for information, many of the journalists are worried. It is tough to get information about various situations, particularly those reported by the law enforcement or police departments. It is sometimes claimed that it is restricted by legislation. However, this was not the case." (Personal interview, March 03, 2019) The participants of the study had criticized the press law of 2008 and argued, "even though the media law is proclaimed for the journalist's access to information, it offers government

bodies the option to secure documents through bureaucratic processes.” That press law has been replaced by the new media proclamation now (Proclamation No. 1238/2021) that has been in effect since 2021.

*A dispute about high fines.* Introducing high fines to the press law has been a concern of the study informants. Ross (2010) criticized the excessive fines imposed on the media for minor violations of the statute. The study participants are of the opinion that excessive fines escalated self-censorship among private media journalists. For instance, Informant-3, editor-in-chief of one of the print media pointed out, “Despite the fact that the law has elements that promote freedom, it also contains clauses that are repressive and restricting to media institutions. Excessive sanctions for moral damages caused by defamation in the media instill fear in journalists and encourage self-censorship” (Personal interview, March 13, 2019).

On the other hand, the draconian anti-terrorism law's passage in the absence of an independent judiciary exacerbates journalists' self-censorship and strengthens the government's capacity to imprison journalists arbitrarily. Similarly, to the press laws, many of the interviewed sources noted the anti-terrorism law's restrictive nature. For instance, Informant-3, a journalist from one of the print media opined, “the current self-censorship of journalists, particularly those working for private media, was greatly enhanced due to the 2009's anti-terrorism law. The declaration was cited as the primary reason for the detention of journalists and was the reason for the demise of a number of newspapers and magazines. That is why I and scores of other journalists have been imprisoned for the past seven years” (Personal Interview, March 13, 2019)

*Government intervention in media freedom.* Another major impediment to media freedom in Ethiopia is the government's authoritarian political intervention (Ross, 2010; Skjerdal, 2012a; Melisew, 2013; Freedom House, 2019). According to the authoritarian theory of the press, the government has absolute power and control over the press, such as ownership, content, license, and the use of mass media. The authoritarian state requires direct governmental control of the mass media, and the media are not allowed to print or broadcast content that could undermine the established authority (McQuail, 1994). The government's use of the media as a tool to dissuade its opponents rather than as an autonomous social institution with a function in every aspect of society limited media freedom. Oromia Radio and Television Organization (ORTO), presently known as Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN), is a notable example of a state-owned media outlet that fired 20 journalists in 2014.

We asked the study participants the root causes of the suppression of media freedom in Ethiopia. All of them concurred to reflect that the EPRDF regime was one characterized as repressive and as a context where the law and the practice were in contradiction. Even the provisions by those repressive legislations were not realized even in the context where there was a narrow space to entertain freedom. Skjerdal (2012a) argued that the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) is commonly portrayed as an exemplar of Ethiopia's alleged authoritarian turn. Repressions against journalists and tightly controlled state media channels are widely used as evidence of restrictions on public liberties.

During the EPRDF regime, the government employed media outlets under party sponsorship, and journalists were intimidated by the federal and regional security forces (Melisew, 2013). Informant 5, the editor-in-chief of one of the private print media argued, “The journalists were accused by the government after they reported on human rights violations and condemned the government's savage responses to peaceful public rallies across the country” (Personal interview, March 13, 2019). The government blocked the media that were alternative voices at the time including Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio (ESAT) and the Oromia Media Network (OMN) (Personal interview, March 2019). We, however, are not to suggest that all these things have changed now though we witness some improvements.

*Freedom versus professionalism in the media.* In Ethiopia, where media independence is a new phenomenon, there is lack of professionalism. State media are assumed unreliable sources of information that government officials and economic elites unduly use for their own purposes. On the contrary, their unbalanced and sensationalist type of report put the private media to blame (Berhanu, 2014; Melisew, 2013). Despite the fact that government intervention is the primary cause of restrictions of media freedom in Ethiopia, a lack of professionalism among practitioners has also hampered their democratic functions and independence. The

private print media are said to lack the capacity to serve the public interests partly due to limitations in terms of professional practice.

Due to lack of journalistic professionalism, the Ethiopian media are not adequately carrying out the democratic roles that they are intended to play (Melisew, 2013). According to the study participants, there are media outlets that served particular interest and failed to play their role in society. For instance, Informant-1 pointed out, "in Ethiopia, the media have fallen short of the role it [they] should have played in society." This manager is of the opinion that "Journalists from the corporate and public sectors should actively participate in addressing institutional flaws. Media outlets should serve the interests of the people who establish their agenda." (Personal interview, March 04, 2019). Informant-4, editor-in-chief of one of the print media argued, "There is no collaboration between government and private media journalists. Journalists who work for the government media believe that they are the only ones who care about the country's progress. Those who work in the private media, on the other hand, see themselves as genuine sources of information, and blame those who work for the government as the ruling party's public relations" (Personal Interview, March 20, 2019). He also added that "Political polarization in the country is the main challenge to media freedom. The private media are acting as an opposition party communication offices. They worked with too much sensationalism. The media should not be a reflection of the polarized political scenarios. For the better media environment, both private and public media should be free at least from reflecting their political interests in their coverage of issues." (Personal Interview, March 20, 2019). The findings here are in line with assertion by previous studies (Shimelis, 2006; Melisew, 2013).

The study participants also suggested ways to improve professionalism in the journalistic practice of the media in Ethiopia. Informant-2 argued, "To effectively address journalistic professionalism, media companies should provide training opportunities for their personnel. That could be in the form of university courses, short-term trainings, conferences, and workshops" (Personal interview, March 03, 2019) Informant-5, editor of one of the broadcast media, is of a similar view to suggest, "in order to improve journalistic professionalism, there should be partnership between media outlets and universities. Media institutions should get ongoing professional help from higher education institutions in order to efficiently execute their professional responsibilities" (Personal interview, March 19, 2019)

*Freedom versus media financial capacity.* Another factor that motivates media professionals to serve the interests of individuals or groups in their performances is money. Journalism is not always a well-paid profession. Several journalists look for ways to augment their income to live a better life and have personal security (Kruger, 2004). When their only source of money is the government and a few advertisers, many media outlets compromise their professionalism to the extent of falsifying facts. The participants of this study argued that financial limitation is one of the major challenges for journalists in Ethiopia. Informant-2 argued that insufficient finance allocated for the media paved the way for professional corruption and distortion of facts. "Finance is required for the media to exist. State media, in particular those that do not work for profit, should receive adequate funding from the government. In the absence of this, journalists may be tempted to engage in corruption and serve the interests of individuals (Personal interview, March 03, 2019). This, however, is part of the story as the practice of corruption could go beyond the idea of being 'sufficiently' paid in relative terms.

Informant-6, a senior journalist working for one of the print media, contends, "The country's journalism has been hampered by a lack of funds. For example, we have no correspondent office in neighboring Kenya, and all of our journalists are based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital. So, if something happened outside of the country, we would not have a speedy access to information or the financial means to travel to the scene." (Personal interview, March 25, 2019)

Informant-3 argues, "Despite the introduction of new print media following the reform, the print media is not as developed as it could be due to lack of funds, as advertising is directed to broadcast media rather than print media" (Personal interview, March 13, 2019). Likewise, Informant-2 made a similar claim when he argues, "The lack of funding in conventional media is due to social media. The public receives the information

before a newspaper or a magazine is available for readers. Individuals can spread the information as “citizen journalists” before it is produced and disseminated by the conventional media. As a result, the print media should have exclusive access to information and get government support in the form of tax exemptions.” (Personal interview, March 20, 2019) On the other hand, Informant-7, a journalist from one of the broadcast media indicated that print and broadcast media are experiencing financial difficulties because of high satellite rental costs, limited private printing businesses, and the government's failure to distribute state-related advertising evenly among media (Personal interview, March 22, 2019). The findings highlight that being short of funds is compromising the professional independence and autonomy of the media.

#### 4.2 Media Freedom in Post-Political Reform Period

The government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed introduced several reforms including the recently promulgated Press Law (Proclamation No. 1238/2021). This study focused on media reforms as perceived by the practitioners themselves. Moreover, the period is short and it is reflective of the honeymoon of the post-political reform situation. According to the media practitioners, we interviewed, the media environment is relatively better than before, and the country has allowed a large number of broadcast and print media that were banned before. According to Informant-1, “The reform was successful in terms of going beyond the release of imprisoned journalists and politicians to ease the self-censorship practice among media practitioners.” (Personal interview, March 20, 2019) The journalists and the public have the right to ask what they feel is important, and the government has a duty to respond to their questions accordingly towards transparency and accountability of governance. Though access to information is legally respected, the government is criticized in ensuring this right even after the reform. The media practitioners argued that even though there is a reform to have a better access to government information, there are limitations in practice. Informant-7 contended, “even though higher government officials are working cooperatively with the media outlets in providing information, the door of most of the government institutions are still closed to journalists. The officials at the lower administration level remain unchanged. They are not willing to see journalists. This is difficult for journalists to balance their report.” (Personal interview, March 22, 2019)

The Media Practitioners supposed that the reform introduced by the Prime Minister would have paramount importance in enabling the Ethiopian media to entertain different points of views. Journalists from two of the broadcast media, Informant-7 and Informant-5 share a similar view to opine that before the reform, state media were manipulated by the government where as private media like ESAT and OMN were jammed at different times. Even the people who accessed to these media were arrested, tortured, and they were denied their freedom to access information (Personal interviews, March 19 & 22, 2019). Ethiopia has achieved significant reforms to the media environment. The country has improved from being one of the most-censored countries in the world and one of the worst jailers of journalists in sub-Saharan Africa to one that created a relatively better space in the post-reform period. The government released imprisoned journalists and as of 2019, there were no journalists in jail in Ethiopia for the first time in 14 years. Diaspora media outlets previously banned in Ethiopia operate freely, and journalists report few threats from the government’s security services (CPJ, 2019). The situation seems to change now, arguably, to the negative as this publication is being finalized.

*Media's post-reform challenges.* In comparison to the pre-reform period, Ethiopian media now has better freedom. New publications have entered the market. However, there are still issues that need to be addressed. One of the issues is that some media organizations and individuals are unaware of the rights and responsibilities entrusted to them. So do some government organs and public officials. Subscribing to Social Responsibility Theory, the press is essentially free, but it has certain societal responsibilities, including truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, and balance in reporting. Individuals and media outlets, however, are not expressing their opinions in this manner. As a result, they have become causes of instability in many sections of the country, resulting in the deaths of many innocent civilians. Informant-5 said, “Individuals who overuse the



freedom instigated chaos among the people and media are not also responsible as such. This will give the opportunity for the government to bring back its repressive regime against the media.” (Personal interview, March 19, 2019)

The rise of reckless social media activism and hate speech, which has been common during the pre-political reform period (Skjerdal, 2011) is also posing a threat to the media landscape's present reforms. All of the informants highlighted the spread of fake news on social media as a roadblock to the current political reform efforts. For example, Informant-6 claimed: “false news propagation on social media was causing turmoil and instability in many sections of the country and among various factions of society. The proposed hate speech law is a helpful step to combat disinformation on social media, but it should not be restrictive to media freedom” (Personal interview, March 25, 2019).

Another obstacle to media freedom, according to Informant-7, is the recent emergence of certain groups that discriminate against media, based on their own interests, and attack those they believe are working against them. In this regards, the journalist contends, “Now, the difficulty in the current media environment is that there are factions that divide media outlets depending on their own interests. They favor the media that they believe covers subjects that are relevant to them, and they dismiss the others. This constitutes a breach of media freedom.” (Personal interview, March 22, 2019) The participants of this study unanimously claimed that freedom is not absolute; there should be rules in place to limit its impact on other people's honor and reputations. The journalists suggested that now is the moment to take individual obligations seriously, particularly that of the media, in exercising freedom because the consequences of not doing so can be disastrous to the media themselves. At this important juncture, media outlets should be more vigilant than ever about their rights and duties. (Personal interviews, March, 2019) Informant-5 observes, “There are media outlets that purposefully cause confusion in society. For media professionals, this is unethical. If the media does not act professionally in an ethical and legal manner, it has the capacity to expose particular segments of society to ethnic cleansing or genocide.” (Personal interview, March 19, 2019)

## 5. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to demonstrate the status of media freedom in Ethiopia based on the reflections of those who are practicing journalism in the country. The practitioners compared the post-reform context (after the rise of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power) with that of the pre-reform media operations and activities to capture the change. The study's findings revealed that media freedom had been limited, and that the relationship between media institutions and the government has deteriorated. For example, in the pre-reform era, government officials were hesitant to provide any kind of information to the media and intimidated journalists who were critical of them. This, according to the practitioners, has relatively changed though there is some dilemma.

Despite the fact that the press legislation allows the media to voice ideas or criticisms on a variety of topics, the government has been highly critical of such view points and less tolerant of media criticisms. The media have had difficult time getting information from government agencies, which has harmed press freedom and freedom of expression. Prior to the political reforms, lack of professionalism among media practitioners, in addition to restrictive legislation and government character, were the reasons for the rollback of press and expression of freedom. The practitioners' reflections reveal that they have exercised their right to free expression in the face of a variety of obstacles. Some journalists have been arrested, exiled, and subjected to government pressure. In the pre- and post-reform periods, the lack of professionalism among media practitioners constituted a barrier to media independence.

There are journalists that do not work professionally since the media industry in the country is underdeveloped, and they utilize the profession to further their own interests. The study also suggested that finance is a barrier for media institutions, particularly for private media, which has ramifications for media freedom. Compared to the pre-reform period, the government attempted to improve the conditions for the

media landscape with a new law in effect. Several journalists were released from prison following the recent political reform where the UNESCO hailed Ethiopia for the progress it exhibited to improve the space for Freedom of Expression. According to the study participants, the media now has a relative freedom to write and report responsibly. Despite these advancements, the lack of professionalism and accountability on the side of individuals and some media and authorities continue to pose a threat to the Ethiopian media independence.

## 6. Recommendations

Recognition of media freedom in the constitution or successive legal statutes is necessary, but not sufficient to ensure freedom in practice. As a result, the government should work towards creating conducive environment to the media in reality. The government could ease the financial difficulties the private media are facing by evenly distributing, of course tied to their performance, its advertisements to the media. Freedom of expression does not equate spreading misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, or fake news. Hence, the media on their part need to practice ethical and responsible journalism. Educational institutions with journalism programs need to work with the media industry to support them in skills enhancement trainings and responding to the needs of the industry by designing state of the art curricula. As mentioned at the outset, the study is a qualitative assessment that covered a limited period (especially with regard to the post-reform situation). Hence, the claims made here are not generalizable and the conclusions are tentative. We, therefore, recommend a wider survey involving the perception of journalists and relevant stakeholders in the field for future research in the area.

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### Authors' contributions:

<sup>1</sup>Tesfaye Tufa: Corresponding author; collected and transcribed the data under the supervision of the second author. He analyzed and interpreted the data with the support and guidance from the second author. He was also involved in the write-up.

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Melisew Dejene: advised the first author since the time of the proposal development for his thesis until the write-up of this manuscript. He was involved in the analysis and write-up of this manuscript. He with the first author edited the manuscript based on comments from reviewers and the editor of the journal.

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