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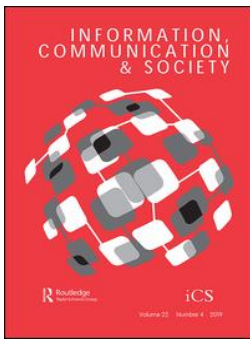
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Social media hate speech in the walk of Ethiopian political reform: analysis of hate speech prevalence, severity, and natures

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ABSTRACT

It is evident in this study that the social media sphere which has been highly controlled by the Ethiopian government for a long seems to untie right after the advent of the new political reform commenced in 2018. Following the transition, it is apparent that people are relatively enjoying the freedom of expression. On the contrary, the new digital platform is deemed to be subdued by the emergence of hate speech which is attributed to political, ethnic, and religious underpinnings. The study employs a quantitative approach to analyze users' comments collected from rivalry ethnic-based Television channels' Facebook and YouTube. Using a binary analysis, a substantial prevalence of social media hate speech is found. Mainly ethnic, religious, and political-based hate natures are also found. Most of the hate comments are offensive; however, a few comments are laid on incitement to violence, and genocide severity levels. Contesting memory of the past, associating ethnicity with religion, culture, and language issues are the main triggering factors of hate speech in Ethiopia. The online commenters imitate the offline ethnic tension in the country that upsurge during the political reform. Thus, identity-driven hate speech in tandem with the reform incidents has suffocated the Ethiopian social media.

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Social media; hate prevalence; hate severity; hate natures; triggering factors

Introduction

Given its subjective nature, hate speech has a broader sense both in terms of its concept and consequences. Although the term hate speech is so popular, no single definition is accepted by international consensus, but the term is largely understood to mean speech that attacks or ridicules a group or a person based on characteristics supposedly typical of the group or the person addressed (Benesch, 2011). Congruently, Yong (2011) explains hate speech is an open term utilizes for describing others on the grounds of their identity. Other scholars also define hate speech as any public expression that promotes or justifies hate for personal and societal identities, such as religion, ethnicity, political view,

language, culture, geography, gender, disability, and others (Cohen-Amalgor, 2011; McGonagle, 2002).

The sphere of social media sites has recently become one of the channels of hate speech everywhere because of its unregulated user-generated content. Unlike mainstream media, social media has not gate-keeping mechanism and editorial rules that filter each contribution before dissemination. For these and other reasons, studies show that social media serve as a sphere of bullying, bigotry, discrimination, prejudice, and intolerance based on a certain social identity such as ethnicity, religion, nationality, sex, color, and others (Carlson, 2017; Cohen-Amalgor, 2011; McGonagle, 2002). These all substantiate the conception of hate speech as an attack on peoples' identity.

Regarding this, Ethiopia is a country of multi-identities. on top of this, an ethnic cluster of communities in Ethiopia becomes the basis of the country's federal structure, source of power, and resources since the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power in 1991; ethnic politics have been practiced in the country by both the ruling, and most opposing parties; political rhetoric had emphasized peoples' ethnic differences and divisions (Abbink, 2011). Thus, scholars argue that the prevalence of social media hate speech in Ethiopia, as shown in recent studies (Mulatu, 2019; Téwodros, 2019), is attributed to ethnic politics, and EPRDF government rhetoric. As a result, critics were warning that such ethnic politics could slip into ethnic discrimination and ethnically motivated violence (Pohjonen, Gagliardone, & Patel, 2014). However, the EPRDF government had continued with its ethnic politics for nearly 3 decades until removed from power in 2018 following consecutive violent mass protests.

The collapse of EPRFD intensified hate speech as the antagonism between social groups for political power would be intensified (Minority Rights Group International, 2014). Scholars also assert that hate speech does not stand alone as the online and offline world feeds each other (Althoff et al., 2017; Tirrell, 2017), but it goes with economic, and political chaos. it could also be the simplicity of expressing hatred on media platforms (Minority Rights Group International, 2014), which also is true on Ethiopian ethnic-based media such as Oromo Media Network, Amhara Satellite Radio and Television, and Dimetsi Weyane TV. Accordingly, historical, political, and contemporary socio-political situations appear to be indicators to recognize the extent of both online and offline hate speech in a country. Consequently, hate speech could become more prevalent in social media during the Ethiopian political transition from the EPRDF regime to Prosperity Party (PP) reformist government. For this purpose, a brief discussion of Ethiopian politics, and the contemporary situation are next.

A brief historical background for current Ethiopian ethnic tensions

Since the mid-twentieth century, Ethiopia has passed through ethnic political difficulties. In 1974 the Solomonic dynasty Imperial rule ended with a military junta coup and was replaced by a revolutionary's Derg. Then civil wars were held between the Derg and ethnically organized rebels such as Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Tigray Liberation Front (TPLF), and Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Then in 1991, the rebels overthrew the Derg federal government and took power forming a front composed of four ethnic-based regional parties namely, Tigray Liberation Front (TPLF), Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), Oromo People Democratic Organization (OPDO),

and South Peoples and Nations Nationalities Organization (SPNNO). While Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) had a secession from Ethiopia. Then ethnic federalist Front, EPRDF ruled Ethiopia (1991–2018) under the leading role of TPLF as a 'god-father'; ethnicity becomes central to control power and access to resources (Abbink, 2011; Bekalu, 2017; Semir, 2019).

Following the government arrangement, opposition political parties, youth and women associations, and even professional associations have followed ethnic lies (Skjerdal & Mulatu, 2020), as the EPRDF government had built an ethnic-based political economy. Moreover, financial institutions (banks, insurances, and micro cooperatives), media institutions (regional media, ethnic-based media), security forces (regional special forces), and even vehicles' Targa ethnicized as per the political system (Abbink, 2011; Bekalu, 2017). The cumulative effects of these triggered the public to protest the ruling EPRDF.

Following nearly three years (2015–2018) of mass youths' protest the EPRDF government, EPRDF has been to enter a new political reform¹ in 2018. At that juncture, Abiy Ahmed has become Ethiopia's Prime Minister on 2 April 2018, and many Ethiopians across the country and in the Diaspora showed great support regardless of ethnic lines. Subsequently, ethnic tension had started to ease and peace seemed to prevail over hate. The media including social media have presented hopeful and unison messages and the change becomes visible both online and offline, as the offline situations expand to the online.

Nevertheless, the political reform situation has not lasted long with the same temper. After six months of the start of the reform, the public support for the reformist government has increasingly decreased. Ethnic tension has risen again, specifically among ethnic Oromo, Amhara, and Tigray. Consequently, social media hate speech has become a common experience. Considering the bouncing of ethnic tension, on 13 February 2020, Abiy's government has passed '*Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation 1185/2020*' aiming to regulate hate speech circulation on any platform including social media. However, critics argued that it inherently intended to limit critics against the political reform (Solomon 2019; Téwodros, 2019; Yohannes, 2020).

Restrictive internet access and social media in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, Data and Internet users reach 22.3 Million in June 2019 out of an estimated to be 114 million populations (Ethio-telecom 2019 annual report²). Among social media sites, Facebook and YouTube are popular in Ethiopia (Mirani, 2015). From the total Ethiopian internet users, Facebook had more than 4.5 million users (Yohannes, 2018); and it reaches 6.07 million³ in 2020. YouTube also has an important share of audiences in Ethiopia. Only the top ten YouTube sites have more than 3.44 million subscribers⁴, and from this, the Ethiopian mainstream media YouTube channels' audiences share is also very significant, for instance, 12 mainstream media television channels account for 3.843 million subscribers and 686 million total uploaded video views until October 2019.

In Ethiopia, the Telecom service is a government monopoly and considered as a cash-cow and the hand of the government to control the flow of information. Using this monopoly opportunity, the EPRDF government was locking websites, disconnect mobile

data, and slow online information access aiming to limit protests (International Media Support, 2018; Yohannes, 2018). Following the April 2018 political reform, the Ethiopian government reconnected the mobile data and broadband internet services that were cut off since 2016 and, also unblocked more than 246 websites, and blogs that have been inaccessible for over a decade (Badwaza & Temin, 2018). Along with an end to the blocking of the websites and restoration of access to better internet services, journalists, activists, and bloggers who used to work in exile, back home, and expand the online information accessing (World Press Freedom Index, 2019).

Despite improvements, scholars recommend the reform government to lift internet access, standardize laws that prosecute freedom of expression, refrain from surveillance, censorship, and internet shutdowns (Badwaza & Temin, 2018). However, during the ongoing political reform, internet services were shut down twice in June 2019 alone following the students' national exam⁵ and the killing of political and military leaders in Amhara regional state and Addis Ababa. Furthermore, following the assassination of the renowned Oromo singer, Hachalu Hundessa, the government shut down the internet from the end of June to the first week of July 2020. After the start of the reform, online antagonism against others seems a new normal in the country.

Previous works on Ethiopian social media hate speech

A few studies reviewed the impacts of the political reform on the Ethiopian social media sphere. Yohannes (2018) in his study asserted that along with the freeing of social media, information explosion, disinformation, fake news, and hate speech become the new reality in Ethiopia. Similarly, Solomon (2019) warned that the dissemination of online hate speech endangers human and democratic rights, the long-standing social solidarity, and eventually led to political and socio-physiological disorder. Others also note that the expansion of social media freedom is abused and the dissemination of hate speech and fake news on social media has been affecting the lives of millions of people, business activities, citizens' movements; furthermore, millions are evicted while hundreds have died in Ethiopia (FOJO Media Institute, 2019; Kiruga, 2019; Seid et al., 2020).

Despite there have been some researches that address social media hate speech in Ethiopia, the studies were lean analyzing a sample of elites' Facebook page posts. The studies ignore social media users' comments. Besides, none of the studies tried to examine the mainstream media and social media intersection content (users' comments on the mainstream media's social outlets). They presented social media as an alternative new media; they focused on studying 'posts' to show the prevalence of social media hate speech. They did not address the natures, and severity of social media hate speech and lack specific study context.

This study considers users' comments on the mainstream media's Facebook pages and YouTube channels. It addresses also the severity, nature, and triggering factors of social media hate speech. More, this study has a specific study context – the ongoing Ethiopian political reform as it is worth studying the extent of social media hate speech during a political transition where the counter is under the state of interregnum. As, hate speech could aggravate and intensify by the antagonism between social groups for political power after the collapse of oppressive central regimes (Minority Rights Group

International, 2014; Tirrell, 2017). Importantly, analyzing how hate speech is prevailing, in competing ethnic-based media's social outlets would offer new insights.

Theoretical framework- Social Identity Theory

The study's finding on the identity-based hate speech, particularly ethnic-based hate speech, further underlines the viability of Social Identity Theory's assumption that states the origin of the conflict between different social groups rooted in collective identity and struggle over resources (Reynolds & Turner, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Noting to the triggering factors of social media hate speech recognized in this study, power, and land were among the majors where identity-based animosity built-in. Thus, after 40 years of Henri Tajfel and John Turner's hypothesis that social grouping, categorization, prejudice, and discrimination basis on in-group favoritism and out-group antipathy, continued being exhibited in Ethiopia without being affected by the commencement of social media that supposed to integrate and interconnect people by easing the means of communication.

It is obvious as many people have been arguing, this is an information age, not alone nation, global interconnective is high, and global citizen is emerging, and locality is supposed to be diminished. Rebelliously, in Ethiopia social division based on social identities (ethnicity, religion, politics) appears to be a fashion as power and resource emanate from ethnic groups. Thus, the existing Ethiopian ethnic-politics that center on 'We' and 'They' divisive rhetoric proofs that the basic assumptions of Social Identity Theory have been working, and the found ethnic-politics-based social media hate speech is a revelation of this.

Methods

The study employs a quantitative content analysis of social media users' comments. Manual coding is used for analyzing the data, and results are presented by using descriptive statistics. The users' comments (texts) are collected from competing Ethiopian ethnic-based media's Facebook pages and YouTube channels. The media are namely ASRAT⁶, DWTV⁷, and OMN⁸ – where ASRAT stands for ethnic Amhara, DWTV stands for ethnic Tigray, and OMN stands for ethnic Oromo groups in Ethiopia. The three ethnic groups, who own these media, together account (62%) of the country's population (ECSA, 2007). Moreover, they dominate Ethiopian political history including contemporary ethnic-driven politics.

From the media's programs, this study considered OMN's '*Leyu Zegijit*', ASRAT's '*Asrat Semonegna*', and DW's '*Woketawi Guday*' weekly programs produced in the Amharic language. These programs highlight current hot issues of the country with a talk-show format, and the contents of the program are also dominated by conflict stories, and politically oriented, which have the potential to aggravate hate speech. Purposefully, about 36 stories were considered that dealt with major incidents such as, not limited to, high figures assassinations, killings, evictions of people, that have happened during the tenor of the political reform (April 2018 to July 2020). I have collected the 17,050 users' comments from the 36 stories.

Filtering the users' comments was important to make the comments suitable for analysis. Hence, symbols, links, emotions (like, love, care, laugh, wow, dislike, angry, sad), feeling (celebrations, dancing, crying), and any other non-textual comments were removed before the analysis. After filtering none-textual comments, other textual comments except Amharic and English were removed, as the investigatory speaks only Amharic and English. Hence, the coding and analysis were done on 8,525 Amharic and English textual users' comments manually. Out of these 2,697, 1,942, and 3,886 comments were collected from ASRTA, DWTV, and OMN Facebook pages and YouTube channels respectively.

The study utilized a coding frame established by various literature for manual annotation. First, a binary analysis was done based on what is hate and not hate. Accordingly, hate speech to this study is any public expression that promotes or justifies hate for personal and societal identities, such as religion, ethnicity, political view, profession, and others (Cohen-Amalgor, 2011; McGonagle, 2002). The study also adapted ARTICLE 19 (2015) hate speech severity pyramid. This pyramid labels hate speech as offensive/abusive, incitement to violence, and incitement to genocide based on the impacts the speech could miff targets. This study also uses ARTICLE 19 (2015) and Press Unit (2019) notions of natures of hate speech; accordingly, accuse, denial, inciting hatred, and violent attack on an entire ethnic group can be referred to as ethnic hate; whereas, aggravating hostility, and violent attack towards a religious group is religious hate; and if such labeling is given to people because of their political affiliation, it becomes political hate.

Findings

Prevalence of social media hate speech in Ethiopia

The extent of hate speech on the Ethiopian social media sphere is inspected by a binary analysis of the users' comments found from the selected ethnic-based media's Facebook pages and YouTube channels. Accordingly, from the 'hate' and 'not-hate' categorical manual annotation of the total 8,525 users' comments, 2,834 (33.24%) users' hate comments were found from the three media's (ASRTA, DWTV, OMN) Facebook and YouTube sites during the sample period (April 2018 to July 2020). The rest of 5,691 (66.76%) users' comments were none hate.

As shown in Figure 1, the prevalence of social media hate speech found from OMN was the highest in number. Oromo elites present their ethnic group as victims in Ethiopian political history; hence, more grievances in the form of hate speech were articulated

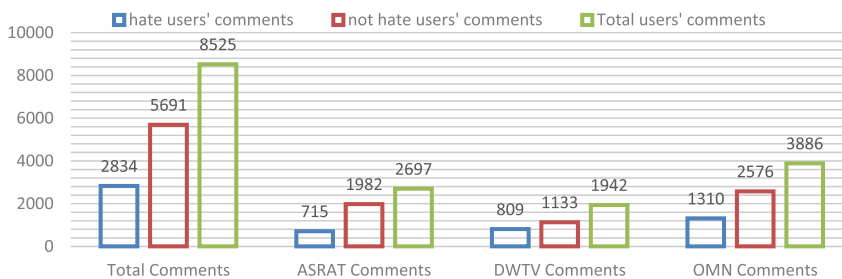


Figure 1. The prevalence of hate speech by media.

by commenters. The prevalence of social media hate speech observed on ASRAT’s, and WDTV’s social media sites also cannot be taken for easy. Considering the impacts of hate speech on targets, the observed hate users’ comments are enough to discriminate, dehumanize, and distract the social cohesion in the multi-identity country. The following instances of comments found on OMN’s Facebook page post⁹ support the quantitative results.



Translation: Eradicate ‘Nefetegna’/Amhara

Translation: ‘Gala’ utilized to dehumanize Oromo

As shown in the above-presented hate comments, Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups are targeted by the OMN’s Facebook followers. The commenters refer to Ethiopian political history to offend these ethnic groups. The commenter with the name ‘Shamsu Oromoo’ describes Amhara as ‘Nefetegna’ to associate with the feudal system. A few Ethiopians used this word to portray Amhara as a historical oppressor of other ethnic groups in Ethiopia and discriminate against Amhara for that allegation. On the contrary, the second commenter with the name ‘Amanuel’ calls the Oromo ethnic group ‘Gala’. This word is used in Ethiopia to dehumanize the Oromo personality. Some presented it as Oromo’s name which was in use during the feudal period. Consequently, the word ‘Nefetegna’ and ‘Gala’ are used to highlight enmity between Amhara and Oromo in Ethiopia.



Translation: Glory to God, today, more than 50 Amhara killed within a day; [sounding happiness] Victory for Oromo and Tigray people; death for Donkey Amhara.

The comment above is also dangerous speech found in DWTV YouTube channel upload.¹⁰ The user target Amhara ethnic group in the comment. Following the killing of a group of Amhara people in Benishangule-Gumz regional state, the commenter wishes victory for the Oromo and Tigray and death for the Amhara. Dehumanizing is also observed in the comment by refereeing Amhara as ‘donkey’. This comment emanates from the offline conflicts happening among Amhara, Oromo, and Tigray elites. This indicates that the contemporary ethnic tension in the country’s political reform has been contributing to the prevalence of hate speech online.



Translation: Let God Eliminate Oromo

Another instance of hate comment found from ASRAT's YouTube channels chants death for the Oromo ethnic group. It shows the antagonism between the Ethiopian ethnic groups, specifically, among the most competing social groups – Amhara, Oromo, and Tigray. These three ethnic groups have been fighting for political, historical, and economic dominance for centuries. The offline rivalry transcends to the online sphere and social media users are influenced by the political elites' fight for power.

The severity of social media hate speech in Ethiopia

This part spotlights results and findings that emanate from coders' categorization of users' comments as offensive, incitement to violence, and incitement to genocide. To categorize the comments, a guidebook was prepared based on pieces of literature that deal with hate speech severity levels, such as ARTICLE 19 (2015), Benesch (2010 & 2013), and Press Unit (2019). Ethiopian social media users utilized a range of hate words and phrases to comment on the selected media's stories posted on their Facebook and YouTube sites. Using these hate comments, the size of each offensive, violent, genocide comment is determined. Accordingly, the pie-chart below presents the findings.

As indicated above in Figure 2, the size of offensive users' comments on the selected media's Facebook and YouTube sites was the largest by far. From the total hateful users' comments, about 2,720 (95.98%) were offensive, 89 (3.14%) were an incitement to violence, and 25 (.88%) were incitement to genocide. Although the number of incitements to violence and incitement to genocide users' comments were minimal, their impacts on the targets can be more consequential than the offensive comments.

Besides, Figure 2 signposts each of the selected ethnic-based media social outlets contribution to the severity level of social media hate speech in Ethiopia's contemporary contexts. It is evident, hateful users' comments found in OMN's DWTV's Facebook and YouTube sites dominate the severity level. The next highest offensive users' comments were found from DWTV's Facebook and YouTube sites, however, the second-highest incitement to violence and incitement to genocide speeches were found from ASRAT's Facebook and YouTube sites. The lowest size of incitement to genocide speeches found on DWTV's Facebook and YouTube sites.

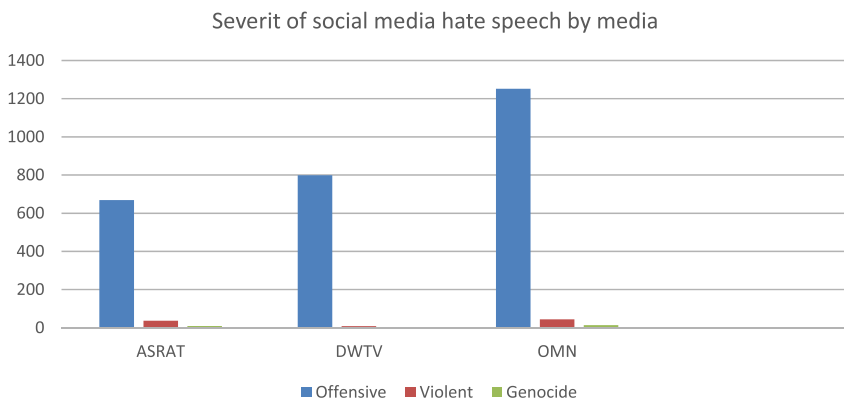


Figure 2. The severity of the social media hate speech by media.

Natures of social media hate speech in Ethiopia

To label the natures of hate found in the users' comments, I prepared a guidebook grounded on kinds of literature of natures of hate speech such as ARTICLE 19 (2015), Benesch (2010 & 2013), and Press Unit (2019). Accordingly, I have considered certain social identities that influence the country's history, politics, and contemporary socio-economy. These are ethnic, religious, and political affiliations. Under the ethnic groups – Amhara, Tigray, and Oromo ethnic groups are considered, whose elites have been dominating the contemporary Ethiopian political, and socio-economy discourses. Related to religion – Orthodox Christianity, and Islam are included, as they are the dominant religious institutes in the country. Regarding political parties, I want to remain neutral in prioritizing them for this study; therefore, all the political parties mentioned in the users' hateful comments are considered. The rest hate comments labeled as 'other'. Chart three below presents the findings [Figure 3](#).

The general results, found from the selected ethnic-based media's Facebook and YouTube sites, show that about 904 hate comments were politically motivated, 896 hate comments were ethnic-based, and 71 hate comments were religious-based. The rest 963 hate comments were placed under the 'other' hate comment category. The 'other' hate comments size was the highest record because it incorporates various targets including individuals, professions, sex, gender, academic, and other social status.

Politically motivated social media hate speeches

As shown in [Table 1](#), a total of 904 hate comments occurrences are exhibited in the eight targeted political parties following the selected media's social media outlet contents. Amongst, the data reveals that the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) takes the highest number of hate comments followed by the Prosperity Party (PP). On the contrary, the National Movement of Amhara (NaMa) and Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) is found

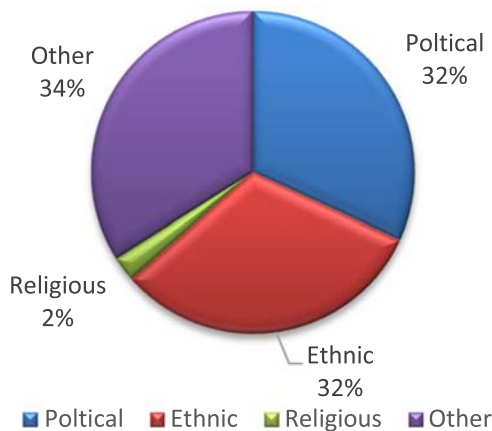


Figure 3. Natures of social media hate speech found in users' comments.

Table 1. The size of politically motivated hate comments.

Targeted political parties	The Selected Media			Total by Political Party
	ASRAT	DWTV	OMN	
Prosperity Party (PP)	109	53	114	276
Tigray Liberation Front (TPLF)	49	408	39	496
Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)	18	0	13	31
Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC)	2	0	5	7
National Movement of Amhara (NaMa)	3	0	3	6
Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justices (Ezema)	5	0	14	19
Amhara Democratic Party (ADP)	43	2	2	47
Oromo Democratic Party (ODP)	11	10	1	22
Total by Media	240	473	191	904

to be the least targeted political parties. Moreover, the analysis on the interplay between the media’ social media outlets and the generated comments by the users shows that the total number of hateful reactions of the social media users against the targeted political parties was found to be highest in contents produced by DWTV followed by ASRAT and OMN respectively. Below is a sample of politically motivated hate comments.



Translation: *Why do not we exterminate Amhara National Democratic Movement (NADM)*

Female University students who are ethnic Amhara have been kidnaped from *Dembe-Dollo* University, Oromia region by a militant group. ASRAT, as Amhara affiliated media, covered the story frequently and uploaded the story on its YouTube¹¹ channel. The comment is one of the many comments found in the story. The comment called for violence against the Amhara’s party because the commenter believes that the party fails to safeguard the ethnic group it represents.

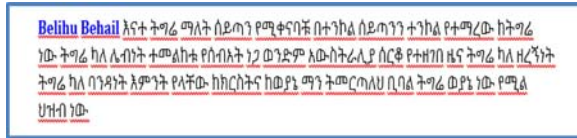
Ethnic based social media hate speech

As signposted in *Table 2*, the Oromo was the most targeted ethnic group in Ethiopia during the last two and a half political reform period. From the total 896 ethnic-based hate comments, 407 were antagonistic against the Oromo. Next, the Amhara was

Table 2. The size of ethnic-based hate comments.

Targeted Ethnic-groups	The Selected Media			Total by Ethnic
	ASRAT	DWTV	OMN	
Amhara	81	60	233	374
Tigray	25	69	21	115
Oromo	102	4	301	407
Total by Media	208	133	555	896

targeted more. From the total ethnic-based hate comments, 374 were antagonistic against the Amhara. Relatively, fewer hate comments were against Tigray. From the total ethnic-based hate comments, 115 were targeting Tigray. The comment below is an example of an ethnic-based hate comment.

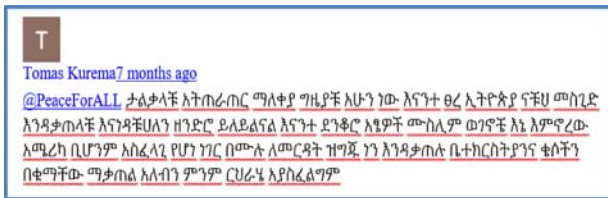


Translation: *The devil itself learns conspiracy from Tigray; if there is Tigray, there is stealing, there is racism, there is sedition; they have no religion, if you ask Tigray to choose either TPLF or Christianity, they choose TPLF (Tigray Liberation Front).*

At the end of June 2020, an Oromo singer named Hachalu Hundessa was assassinated. DWTV reported that the assassins are the Neftegnas (a discriminatory name for Amhara). The DWTV has posted this story¹² on its Facebook page. The OMN also was reporting the story with the same frame. Following these stories, according to the government’s report, more than 160 people were killed in a revenge movement held in Oromia. Many of the victims were Amhara. The comment was given in response to the media allegation and the consequences the story brought.

Religious based social media hate speech

Contrary to my expectation, from the total number of 2834 hate comments, only 71 (2.5%) hate comments were targeting the aforementioned Ethiopian religions. From this, 43 of the religious-based hate comments were targeting Orthodox Christians, while the remaining 28 religious-based hate comments were targeting Muslims. Besides, no hate comment was found that targeted Protestants and Protestantism during the study period. The comment below is an example of a religious-based hate comment Table 3.



Translation: *you will be eliminated; because you are anti-Ethiopia, you burned Mosques; as you burned mosques, we will burn you too; we will fight with you stupid Monarch; I am ready to help in every aspect to burn churches and priests alive, no mercy.*

Table 3. The size of religious hate comments.

Targeted Religious groups	The Selected Media			Total by Religion
	ASRAT	DWTV	OMN	
Orthodox Christianity	6	1	36	43
Islam	12	0	16	28
Total by Media	18	1	52	71

In December 2019, four mosques were burned down in *Mota* city, Amhara region where Christians are dominant and Muslims are minor. OMN covered that story frequently and uploaded the stories on its YouTube channel.¹³ The media present Amhara as anti – Islam and it also tried to equate being Christianity with being Amhara. This situation triggered protests in the Muslim community, and the protests were expanded to social media sometimes in the form of hate speech. And this comment is one of the demonstrations of the religious-based hate speeches in Ethiopia.

Triggering factors of social media hate speech in Ethiopia

The triggering factors are extracted from users’ comments found in the selected media’s social outlets. Accordingly, it is important to explicate thematically the major issues that social media users mentioned in their hateful comments. Commonly, Ethiopian political history, associating religion with ethnicity, the ethnic federal structure, and land issues, and the political reform incidents are mentioned.

The country’s political history

Social media users remark historical injustices and enmity among a few Ethiopian ethnic groups. In their comments, users contend that the Amhara descent feudal ruled the rest of Ethiopians forcefully. Even offline, for example, a few Oromo academicians assume they are still struggling for liberty from Amhara/*Neftegna/ Abyssinians* whom they portray as their colonizer and enemy (Asafa Jalata, 2003; Mohammed, 2002). The working Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front - EPRDF (1995) constitution, in its preamble, also notes that there were historical injustices among Ethiopian nation nationalities (ethnic groups). Besides, regional constitutions divide the Ethiopians as ‘settlers’ and ‘natives’. In this regard, the Oromia’s regional state constitution article (8) (1994), the Benishangule-Gumuz’s regional state constitution (1995) article (2), and the Harari’s people regional state constitution (1997) preamble are good examples.

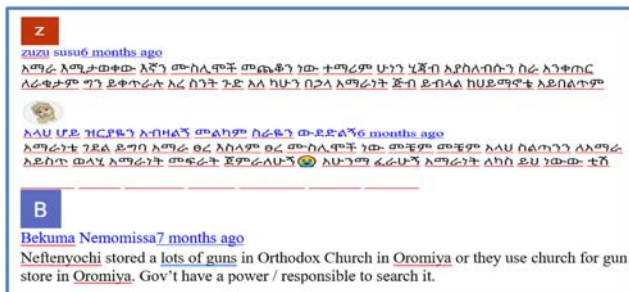
Comparable to this, it is observed that Ethiopian social media users buy the historical oppressor-oppressed narratives revealed with stereotypical naming such as ‘Neftegna’ (feudal ruler) and ‘safari’ (settler). These kinds of hate comments are common that target the Amhara, and the speakers present themselves as Oromo. The following instances of users’ hate comments signify the historical narratives that could trigger hate speech among Ethiopians.



These three comments were found from OMN’s Facebook page post¹⁴ of a story that Jawar Mehammed talked about Ethiopian current tense political situations on 8 May 2020. The first Amharic comment offered by the person named ‘Ibsaa Kiyya’ says – *others can do what they want, but in Oromia, we will nil-down the Neftegnas*. The second comment offered by the person named ‘Zolaa Zelalem’ also has a similar meaning, and it says – *we will bury Nefteгна*. The third comment with the name of ‘Ahmad Mucaa Walloo’ pronounces – *Oromia is for Oromo; we will expel the Nefteгна to Gojjam* (part of Amhara region). These comments signify the narrative of ‘settlers’ against ‘natives’ among a country’s citizens.

Associating ethnicity with religion

Some comments represent Amhara as pro- Orthodox Christianity and anti-Islam; conversely, some commenters associate Oromo with Islam, and antagonist to Christianity. These kinds of commenters are also evident in the offline sphere. For instance, an Oromo scholar professor of Anthropology at Addis Ababa University, Gemchu Megerssa, complains that when the Oromo get baptized, they become Amhara, and he concludes that Christianity is Amharanazation ‘being Amhara’ (LTV Show interview at 00:18–00:20 min, 2 October 2019).¹⁵ The sampled comments below can show this association of ethnicity and religion.



These comments are offered on OMN’s YouTube upload¹⁶ of a story about the burning of Mosques in *Mota* city, Amhara region. The first comment with the name ‘zuzu susu’ says – *Amhara is known for oppressing we Muslims; when we were students they did not allow us to dress Hijab, they do not employ us, rather they employ the nude; hereafter, let Amhara-ness eaten by a hyena, my religion is more important*. The next comment above in the box pronounces – *Let my Amhara – ness go hell; Amhara is anti-Islam anti-Muslims; Let Allah ever do not give power to Amhara; I start dreading Amhara-ness*. The third comment also has the same intent accusing Nefteгна/ Amhara of criminal acts in Oromia using the Orthodox Church as a tool. An attack in Oromia is considered an attack on Muslims.

Ethnic federalism and land possession

One of the contesting issues in Ethiopian contemporary politics is the Oromo’s and the Amhara’s claim for Addis Ababa. There are fighting words over the capital city possession referring to historical rights, and the city’s current geographical location. The

Oromo named the city *Finfinnee* because they argue that it was its previous name before Emperor Menelik II united Ethiopia. They also accuse the Emperor of cleaning Oromo from the city (Finfinnee) and settle Amhara. On the contrary, the Amhara refers to the city's historical name as *Barara* and argues that it was the Royal (Solomonic Dynasty) city of the 15th and early 16th century. The Amhara also blame the 16th-century Oromo invaders for demolishing the city (*Barara*). Then, they praise Menelik II for reclaiming the city to restore forefathers' historical territories. This offline argument expands to the online and triggers hate among Ethiopians. The comments below reveal that.



The comments in the above box are found from OMN's Facebook page posts¹⁷ about the story of the ethnic Gamo and Amhara massacre in Burau city Oromia. The first comment by the name 'Oromo Peace', using a mixed language of English and Amharic in Latin Alphabet, says – *No more space for Menelik settlers in Oromia land*. Similarly, the next comments with the name 'Tsfaye Mootii Demissie' and 'Fatii Intala Harargee' says – *Finfinnee is Oromo land both in law and history; down, down, let settlers leave Finfinnee*. The comments target Amhara as a settler.

Incidents of the political reform

A range of incidents happened after the start of the political reform that brought Abiy Ahmed Ethiopian Prime Minister. Conflicts have been dominating the course of political reform. For instance, on 30 November 2020, P.M Abiy told the parliament 113 major conflicts¹⁸ that cause the loss of many lives, were happened in the past two- and a half-year period. A lot of these conflicts were targeting ethnic identity, as the Amhara was the most frequent target. Many incidents of the reform were triggering hate speech in Ethiopia. Among them, the assassination attempt on P.M Abiy Ahmed on 23 June 2018, the assassination of GERD Manager, Engineer Simegnaw on 25 July 2018, the Burau Massacre on 14–15 September 2018, the Oromo political parties claim to subjugate Addis Ababa on 26 September 2018 were a few incidents happened in the second half of 2018.

Moreover, some incidents were occurring frequently in 2019 and continue still now. To mention, the killing and displacement of people in the Benishangule-Gumuz region, the movement for establishing the Oromia Orthodox church by splitting from Ethiopia Orthodox church, the killing and eviction of people in the Oromia region, and the kidnapping of Amhara female students from Dembe-Dollo University in Oromia are noticeable. Furthermore, there were also grand incidents such as the killing of Amhara regional

state leaders and ENDF high command on 22 June 2019, the burning of Mosques in Mota city Amhara region on 20 December 2019, and the assassination of infamous Oromo Singer Hachalu Hundessa on 28 June 2020.

Discussion and conclusion

The analysis shows that there was a substantial amount prevalence of social media hate speech in the ethnic-based media's social outlets. It is found that out of 8,525 users' comments, 2,834 users' comments contained hate words and phrases, hence labeled as hate speech. This finding is very high compare to what was found by the *Mechachal* project's study. The *Mechachal* project found (0.4%) out of 13,000 posts as hate speech that incites others to discriminate or act against individuals or groups based on their ethnicity, religion, politics, or other (Gagliardone, 2015). This study finding suggests that the danger of hate speech becomes more fatal over time. For instance, nearly three million people displaced and hundreds are killed; Churches and Mosques are burnt with religious people inside during the political reform (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, 2019; Kiruga, 2019).

Concerning hate severity, many of the hate comments, 2,720 were offensive. The rest 89 and 25 users' hate comments were incitement to violence and incitement to genocide respectively. These findings would have meaning when we consider the impacts of each hate speech. As many scholars note, any hate comment has the highest possibility of causing mass violence, acts of terrorism, and at large genocide (Mendel, 2010; Nockleby, 2000; Scheffler, 2015). When internet penetration increases in the last two years in Ethiopia (Ethio-telecom 2019 annual report¹⁹), the impacts of online hate speech becomes more visible.

Politically motivated, and ethnic-based hate speeches are dominant in the Ethiopian political reform with (63.51%) share from the total. Religious-based social media hate speeches take the least share (2.5%). These results concur with the concept that hate speech is a communication of hostility towards a group based on an account of a group's real or perceived identity such as ethnicity, race, religion, nationality, or and others (Yong, 2011; McGonagle, 2002). It is evident people have been targeted because of their ethnicity, religion, and political orientation in Ethiopia (Gagliardone, 2015). Because, the Ethiopian political reform is revealing the costs of ethnic-driven politics (Semir, 2019; Téwodros, 2019).

The study also identifies the major triggering factors of social media hate speech in Ethiopia. Mainly, historical issues, ting ethnicity with religion, ethnic federalism and land issues, and reform incidents are mentioned frequently. Because, hateful and divisive speeches are the result of contemporary scenarios such as the tension between settlers and natives, inter-communal conflicts, ethnic or religious leaders jockeying for power by inciting their supporters against one another, especially post of the fall of authoritarian central governments (Benesch, 2010). Ethiopian current social-political context, naked by a political transition, rests under Benesch's conception of triggering factors of hate speech. Ethiopian social media users replicate the offline identity-based tensions that upsurge more during the political reform.

Hate speech does not stand alone, but it goes with economic, social, and political chaos (Tirrell, 2017). More specifically socio-political contexts that special scourge minorities

can cause some people to suffer deeply, while others remain ignorant and unsympathetic to them (Minority Rights Group International, 2014). Following the breakdown of the central oppressive regime (EPRDF) freedom of speech improved both offline and online (Committee Professional Journalists (CPJ) 2019 report; World Press Freedom Index, 2019). However regional media have been competing for ethnic loyalty, and they call for in-group solidarity by representing the out-groups as an enemy (Addisu, 2019; Tamrat, 2019). These contribute to the intensification of hate speech in the country.

The findings remind the assumptions of Social Identity Theory that suggest how social groups build in-group solidarity and portray out-groups based on the narrative of ‘us’ and ‘they’. Besides, the study results also signpost the basis of discrimination, prejudice, and intergroup conflict, by tracing happenings that are caused by social group-based categorization and self-enhancement motives (Islam, 2013). Taking into consideration the impacts of hate speech that range from demoralizing to genocide (Mendel, 2010; Nockleby, 2000; Scheffler, 2015), identity-based hate speech is becoming worrisome in the Ethiopian contemporary contexts.

As Althoff et al. (2017) the online and offline world feeds each other; hence, Ethiopians’ offline identity-based political tension has been also evident in the online sphere. The study findings concur with the country’s existing socio-political situations where ethnic tension is high and ethnic-based media have been intensifying division among ethnic and political groups (Addisu, 2019; Melesew, 2019). There was hope that the political reform ease previous contention among ethnic groups and repair the long-lasting social cohesion among Ethiopians; on the contrary, the political reform widens the division created during the 27 years of EPRDF (Addisu, 2019; Tamrat, 2019).

Henceforth, the Ethiopian political reform requires great attention in terms of easing identity tension, before it equates to the 1994 Rwanda genocide. The government tries to avert this by passing a hate speech and disinformation prevention and suppression law. Nonetheless, to deter hate speech effectively, law and order are vital more during a political transition (Melesew, 2019; Semir, 2019; Téwodros, 2019). Because of the lack of law and order, in the course of the political reform, identity-based (ethnic, and religious) mass killings have been observed in Oromia,²⁰ Genishangule-Gumuz²¹, and South Ethiopia regions- Guraferda²² only in July, September, and October 2020 respectively. Consequently, hate speech has already been exhibited causing identity-based violent conflict, eviction of people, and killings in Ethiopia (Melesew Dejene, 2019; Téwodros, 2019). Thus, beyond the anti-hate speech law, alternative solutions such as media literacy, civic campaign, and influential figures’ counter-speech are vital to discourage hate speech and associated identity-based attacks (Benesch, 2013; Schmidt, 2015; Téwodros, 2019).

Conclusions

Social media hate speech in Ethiopia shows the trend of increment from the start of the political reform onwards. While comparing the previous studies’ findings, on the concerns of social media hate speech, with this study findings, there is a clear indication of a significant boost on the size of the prevalence of hate speech circulation online. Most importantly, the ethnic-based media social outlets’ identity-oriented contents gravitated toward offensive conversations that target social identities such as primarily

ethnic-politics, and slightly religions. This adheres to the offline identity-driven socio-politics discourse which has been enhanced by legal backgrounds including the working constitutions (both the federal and the regional states).

What is more concerning social media hate speech in Ethiopia is that Ethiopia, a country of multiple social identities seems to continue with ethnic socio-politics arrangements even after the removal of ethnic politics proponent TPLF led EPRDF government from power. Without resolving the offline identity political contests, and mainstreamed historical contradicting narratives, internet penetration and access to social media platforms with reasonable const is growing rapidly. On top of this, the reform relative open ups to freedom of speech in tandem with high low media literacy will possibly worsen the prevalence, severity, and natures of social media hate speech in the country. Thus, addressing the problem of hate speech on social media will be a durable challenge to the country that needs due attention both from the government and non-government actors to implement punitive and non-punitive solutions combined.

Notes

1. Refer the date since Abiy Ahmed appointed as Ethiopian Prime Minister in 2 April 2018, and now onwards despite of many critics to consider it as real and genuine reform.
2. <https://www.ethiotelecom.et/2018-19-efy-p-reporte/>
3. <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>
4. <https://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/youtube/channels/ethiopia/>
5. Ethiopia shut down the Internet for a third day to prevent students from cheating in national examinations. The government was also fearing Activists will leak a scheduled national exam
6. Amhara ethnic based media, visit <https://asratmediahouse.org/about-us/> [access in 16 June 2020]
7. Oromo ethnic based media, visit <https://oromiamedia.com/about/> [access in 17 June 2020]
8. Tigray ethnic-based media, visit <https://www.facebook.com/dimtsiweyane1/> [access in 19 June 2020]
9. <https://www.facebook.com/OromiaMedia/videos/679721766175812/>
10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vG3uhK90udI&lc=UgwUiwhGlqkBhXL7Isp4AaABAg>
11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vG3uhK90udI&lc=UgwUiwhGlqkBhXL7Isp4AaABAg>
12. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?t=1&v=289615952151845>
13. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3egLNA8LhY>
14. Oromia Media Network: <https://www.facebook.com/OromiaMedia/videos/679721766175812/>
15. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAsOwq3Rx0M> [Accessed 14 August 2020]
16. OMN; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3egLNA8LhY>
17. <https://www.facebook.com/OromiaMedia/videos/2262795670619881/>; <https://www.facebook.com/OromiaMedia/videos/289948592215774/>; <https://www.facebook.com/OromiaMedia/videos/479384452580298>
18. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmEcdNSofj0> [play at 1: 01:50 time of the speech]
19. <https://www.ethiotelecom.et/2018-19-efy-p-reporte/>
20. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/7/28/hachalu-hundessas-death-exposed-an-unlikely-anti-abiy>
21. <https://borkena.com/2020/07/29/benishangul-gumuz-security-incident-claimed-at-least-14-civilians/>
22. <https://www.ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/8192/Unidentified-Gunmen-Kill-12-Civilians-in-Southern-Ethiopia>

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