

Suppression of information dissemination in Ethiopia

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Introduction

The Ethiopian state has taken steps to suppress information at the level of dissemination, including preventing access to international and diasporic news, implementing internet and social media shutdowns, and attempts to influence the moderation of social media platforms. These specific tactics reflect the political pressures the Ethiopian government has faced, and the need to adapt to the changing media environment – with consequences both domestically and for the Ethiopian diaspora in Europe.

Summary

A key feature in Ethiopia's media environment has been government monopoly over its telecommunication and internet services, with internet shutdowns and network disruptions used to respond to political unrest and internal conflicts. Following Abiy Ahmed's rise to power in 2018, Ethiopia experienced a brief period of media liberalisation, but renewed conflicts in the country reversed these gains. Since the Tigray War in 2020-2022, the tactics of information control have grown in severity, including new techniques to prevent the sharing and visibility of information on social media, with internet shutdowns, campaigns to influence social media content moderation, and techniques aimed at controlling the salience of information online and in social media.

Context

The media environment in Ethiopia is characterised by a paradox: despite historically low levels of connectivity, the country has relied on some of the world's most extensive

measures to control online communication. While Ethiopia has been among the least connected countries globally, internet access has rapidly grown from about 4% of the population in 2010 to roughly 30% today.¹ Online usage has also shifted from traditional websites to widespread use of social media platforms, video-sharing platforms, and messaging services.

A key feature in Ethiopia's media environment has been the government monopoly over its media system and telecommunication services has enabled information suppression through signal jamming, raising data costs for consumers, and targeted internet shutdowns.

Key Messages

- Suppressing information dissemination in Ethiopia is reactive, driven by crises
- Opposition media, diaspora and human rights organisation websites are routinely blocked
- Internet shutdowns remain a central strategy, from short local disruptions to longer regional blackouts
- Preventing access to the internet and social media often happens through both technical and non-technical means
- The use of internet shutdowns escalated during the Tigray War
- Post war tactics increasingly target visibility of information online

¹ CUNESCO (2025). *Assessing internet development in Ethiopia: Using UNESCO's Internet Universality ROAM-X indicators* (UNESCO Series of Internet Universality National Assessments). UNESCO. <https://doi.org/10.58338/DMFP2740>

The evolution of techniques used to suppress the dissemination of information in Ethiopia can be roughly divided into three periods. The first (2005–2011) saw low connectivity and full government control over the information space. The second (2012–2018) coincided with the growing use of social media for protest and involved more targeted controls by the government, including selective censorship, blocking of international and diasporic media, expanded digital surveillance, periodic internet shutdowns and platform restrictions.²

The current period, shaped by the rise to power of Abiy Ahmed into power in 2018 saw increased liberalisation of the information space. However, following the Tigray War (2020–2022) these reforms were reversed and the civic space shrunk further.

Ethiopia's shrinking spaces for information dissemination

Techniques used to suppress information dissemination in Ethiopia range from full and partial internet shutdowns to attempts to influence the content moderation systems of social media platforms. Based on a review of literature, policy reports, and interviews with key informants, the ARM team has identified the following measures used by the Ethiopian government to restrict the dissemination of information about political violence, opposition protests, and other unfavourable developments, both domestically and transnationally.

Suppressing information dissemination

Information dissemination can be suppressed through the restriction of traditional and online news outlets, internet shutdowns, and the regulation of digital technology companies. This reflects censorship as friction – diverting media and individuals away from censored information, making certain facts, data, social media posts, news articles and books difficult to obtain and see.

One of the key techniques used by the Ethiopian government to prevent the dissemination of information is **internet shutdowns**. This includes a spectrum of approaches³, ranging from internet blackouts and localised network shutdowns targeting specific regions, to platform blockages restricting access to websites or social media platforms and internet slowdowns that throttle connection speeds to undermine information sharing while avoiding the political costs of full shutdowns. Examples of techniques used in Ethiopia recently include:

Internet blackouts

- June 2019: A nationwide internet blackout occurred after the assassination of Ethiopia's Army Chief of Staff⁴

² See Chala, E. H., & Workneh, T. W. (2025). Internet shutdowns in Ethiopia: Discourses of digital sovereignty and information suppression amid political instability. *New Media & Society*, 0(0)

³ See Marchant, E., & Stremlau, N. (2020). A spectrum of shutdowns: Reframing Internet shutdowns from Africa. *International Journal of Communication*, 14, 18. Also: Collyer, M. (2023, May 25). An interdisciplinary exploration of Internet shutdowns. Open Technology Fund. www.opentech.fund/news/an-interdisciplinary-exploration-of-internet-shutdowns/

⁴ Alemayehu Moges, M. (2024). Freedom of the Press, and *Journalism Practices* in Times of Uncertainty in the Case of Ethiopia. *Journalism Practice*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2024.2410932>

- June 2020: A nationwide internet blackout was imposed following the assassination of Oromo singer Hachalu Hundessa to quell violent protests.⁵

Network shutdowns:

- October 2018: A soldier's strike at the Ethiopian national palace triggered an internet shutdown specifically in Addis Ababa
- November 2020 – The Tigray conflict, which commenced in November 2020, led to extensive blackouts imposed in Tigray and subsequent localised disruptions in Amhara and Afar. This has been noted as one of the longest ongoing shutdowns globally.⁶
- Post-2022: After the peace agreement in Tigray (November 2022), internet shutdowns shifted to other conflict zones in Amhara and Oromo regions.⁷

Platform Blockages:

- December 2017: A social media shutdown was imposed, primarily targeting the Amhara and Oromia regions amidst ethnic tensions.⁸
- 2023: The government imposed a five-month restriction on major platforms, including Facebook, Messenger, Telegram, YouTube, and TikTok, during the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Crisis.⁹

Internet Slow-downs (ISs)

- Post-2019, slowdowns have become increasingly prevalent, reflecting a preference for less overt digital suppression. By throttling internet speeds, authorities curtailed online mobilisation while maintaining nominal connectivity to avoid international condemnation, a strategy particularly evident during politically sensitive periods like national elections.¹⁰

Another tactic used by the supporters of the Ethiopian government, and the opposition has been the **weaponisation of content moderation policies** of social media platforms. During the 2020–2022 Tigray War, both state supporters and its opponents routinely attempted to influence content moderation policies and practices of social media companies. This included coordinated mass reporting of content to social media platforms to trigger content removals or account suspensions. These campaigns were often framed as countering hate speech and disinformation, even if their aims are overtly political.¹¹ In this way, content moderation tools of the major social media companies become a means to influence the dissemination of information online: by trying to game the recommender and reporting systems of social media platforms,

⁵ Access Now. (2020, July 16). *Back in the dark: Ethiopia shuts down internet once again*. Access Now. www.accessnow.org/press-release/back-in-the-dark-ethiopia-shuts-down-internet-once-again/.

⁶ Access Now. (2022, November 4). *Two years of internet shutdowns: People in Tigray, Ethiopia, deserve better*. www.accessnow.org/press-release/two-years-internet-shutdowns-tigray/

⁷ Amnesty International. (2023, March 9). *Ethiopia: One month on, authorities must immediately lift blockade on selected social media access in the country*.

⁸ According to Chala and Workneh (2025), Shutdown incidents surged, with 46 recorded in 2016, followed by 45 in 2017, and reaching 48 in 2018.

⁹ Amnesty International. (2023, March 9). *Ethiopia: One month on, authorities must immediately lift blockade on selected social media access in the country*. www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/ethiopians-in-social-media-blackout-for-second-month/

¹⁰ Internet slowdowns are very difficult to identify given that they do not disrupt the entire internet network and can seem similar to technological or bandwidth issues. These reported events here are from: Chala, E. H., & Workneh, T. W. (2025). *Internet shutdowns in Ethiopia: Discourses of digital sovereignty and information suppression amid political instability*. *New Media & Society*, 0(0). p. 12-13

¹¹ Pohjonen, M. (2024). *Political disinformation and content moderation "folklore" in the Global South: Comparative lessons for the 2024 Indonesia elections* (KISIP Paper). Safer Internet Lab. <https://saferinternetlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Matti-Pohjonen-KISIP-PAPER-2024-1.pdf>

and the algorithms that drive them, supporters of both the government and the opposition try to delegitimise opponents and prevent unfavourable information from being shared.¹²

Finally, following the lessons learned during the Tigray War, the focal point of tactics appears to be complementing “harder” measures such as internet shutdowns or censorship with a more multi-faceted range of tactics also aimed at controlling the visibility of information online. Given the difficulty to prevent information from being shared in an increasingly digitally-connected media environment and economy, techniques that shape the kinds of narratives and visibility online are becoming more popular as a strategy of information control. ARM research highlights the need to better understand new strategies that try to shape information salience through techniques such as flooding and agenda setting to control the narrative in the online environment.



Policy recommendations

Ethiopia is manoeuvring its strategic position in the Horn of Africa between traditional Western development partners, emerging powers in the Middle East (esp. United Arab Emirates), China as the most important investor and trading partner, and Russia seeking stronger African presence. In this context, it is challenging for the European Union to influence Ethiopian policies on information freedom, without risking further alienation of bilateral relations. As Ethiopia is a signatory to key international human rights conventions there is a space for carefully tailored messages and engagement in diplomatic dialogue:

- **Tie EU funding to clear rules** for internet shutdowns and transparency in the decisions made.
- **Press major social media platforms** to add additional resources and language capacity for content moderation and prevent the misuse of platforms for political propaganda or false flag mass reporting of content
- **Support Ethiopian civil society and media organisations** with legal and technical support during internet shutdowns or blockages.
- **Negotiate humanitarian whitelists for critical organisations** working in Ethiopia and provide technical help to implement these when internet disruptions occur.
- **Tighten international export controls** for different surveillance tools.

¹² Meisner, C. (2023). The weaponization of platform governance: Mass reporting and algorithmic punishments in the creator economy. *Policy & Internet*, 15(4), 466–477. <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.359>

About the ARM Project

Coordinated by the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), the ARM project delves into authoritarian strategies for information control beyond borders. While foreign disinformation receives ample scrutiny, other forms of foreign information manipulation and intervention (FIMI) remain overlooked.

Analysing Russia, China, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, ARM conceptualises and addresses different forms of FIMI. The project will explore the extent that major global players like China and Russia, alongside Ethiopia and Rwanda, engage in transnational information suppression, particularly targeting European diaspora communities.

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