

Shaping information salience in Ethiopia

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The Ethiopian government's efforts to shape information salience has grown in sophistication, aiming to control conversations online, undermine dissent and criticism, and distract from political and socio-economic challenges. This shift represents authoritarian adaptation to changes in digital technologies. This policy brief addresses the reasons for this shift, its objectives, and mechanisms.

Managing information salience aims to undermine the visibility, and thus the impact, of information damaging to the regime as well as promoting alternative narratives to dominate public discourse.

Summary

The Ethiopian government has complemented traditional censorship and blanket internet shutdowns with more sophisticated efforts to control narratives online, which represents a strategic adaptation to advances in digital technologies and the lessons of the Tigray war.

Increasing dependence of the economy on internet connectivity, the government's ambition of becoming a leader in digital technologies and AI in Africa, and high reputational costs have made internet shutdowns less appealing. As a result, there is a shift towards efforts aimed at controlling the narrative online, undermining and delegitimising critics, and distracting from pressing problems like insurgencies and socio-economic crises.

Managing information salience in Ethiopia is done by a sprawling and evolving apparatus, with a state-organised 'media army' as its cornerstone. The state also mobilises paid commentators, everyday influencers, and civil servants in these efforts. Tactics include dismissing credible reports, discrediting sources, distorting narratives to fit the state's agenda, issue-framing and agenda-setting to set the tone of online conversations, shifting blame to external actors, flooding, and distraction. Typically, it attempts to mobilise ultra-nationalist rhetoric.

Key Messages

- The Ethiopian government has complemented heavy reliance on internet shutdowns with more sophisticated online narrative control
- Shaping information salience is done by a sprawling apparatus, with a 'media army' as its cornerstone
- Such suppression aims to control the narrative, demobilise dissent, and strategic distraction
- Tactics are various and include dismissing credible reports, discrediting sources, distorting narratives, agenda-setting, shifting blame, and flooding
- This shift to suppression of information salience represents strategic adaptation to fast-changing digital technologies
- Online participation is often performative loyalty, driven by digital patronage



The Ethiopian Context

While the political transition in Ethiopia in 2018 which brought Abiy Ahmed to power raised expectations of a democratic transition, these hopes have been dashed by conflict, instability, economic fragility, and political polarisation. Initial reforms, including peace with Eritrea in 2018, gave way to a power struggle with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that erupted into a brutal civil war in 2020, resulting in an estimated half a million casualties before it ended in a fragile peace agreement in 2022.

Despite this, peace has not materialised. The government is battling two intractable insurgencies, with the Fano forces in Amhara, and Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) in Oromia. This has undermined the government's territorial control. The civic space has shrunk significantly. Freedom of expression, association, and assembly are under siege. This internal fragility is compounded by volatile regional geopolitics. The Ethiopian government's pursuit of sea access has created tensions with its neighbours, particularly Somalia and Eritrea, heightening the risk of an armed conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Amid this complex context, the government and its supporters have resorted to the digital space, which they see as critical to undermine dissent, mobilise society, and project strength.

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What and why?

Ethiopia's economy is increasingly connected to the grid, making it harder to employ extensive internet shutdowns without disrupting economic activity. Additionally, the government is attempting to position itself as a tech leader in Africa, with ambitions of digital transformation and AI adoption, which makes internet shutdowns less attractive especially in urban areas. The reputational costs of internet shutdowns, especially from human rights organisations, have also been immense. In addition, old tactics of trying to prevent all information from reaching society, for instance through jamming satellite television and radio or blocking websites, is becoming futile in the digital age.

The importance of the Tigray war of 2020-2022 cannot be overstated. The government's communication blackout was largely ineffective in terms of preventing information about the conflict from reaching the world. The mobilisation of the Tigrayan diaspora and international human rights-based organisations challenged the government's information dominance. The government was rather more successful in mobilising its base, including the diaspora, for counterpropaganda through digital campaigns. The ruling party has taken this lesson to heart, and as such doubled down on its efforts to manage information salience online. As a result, there has been a visible shift towards complementing older modes of censorship with shaping the salience of information by attempting to control the narrative online.

Why Ethiopia shifted from shutdowns to salience

- Economic costs of internet shutdowns
- Digital transformation and AI ambitions
- Rising reputational costs and human rights scrutiny
- Lessons from the Tigray war

How? Institutions, tactics, and techniques

The government attempts to do this through a sprawling digital apparatus. First and foremost is the so-called 'digital media army'.¹ The media army encompasses local officials, party members including youth and women league members, as well as some civil servants, especially experts within communications bureaus at different levels of government. While the media army operates loosely, it can be pooled together and deployed whenever there is a need for coordinated messaging.² Media army members run multiple accounts – both named and anonymous – on multiple platforms, predominantly on Facebook but even on less political channels like Instagram.³

Secondly, the government employs well-known paid activists⁴, who have been very vocal on both social and legacy media, and who are used as mouthpieces to ward-off any criticism, popularise government agenda, and gauge public sentiment around new issues. Some of these activists have become so influential and move in close government and army circles. The commentator Seyoum Teshome, for instance, not only received a Medal of Honor from the Ethiopian National Defence forces (ENDF) but was also made its "honorary" member, during the ceremony of which the Chief of Staff tasked him and other commentators to lead the digital war for the Army.⁵

In addition to paid commentators, the government uses everyday influencers (predominantly on Tiktok), who are not primarily political, but can be co-opted to popularise government projects.⁶ Influencers have been specifically deployed to popularise (and seek legitimacy from) urban corridor projects.⁷ Fourthly, experts and professionals in key government offices are also increasingly pressured to post pro-government messages on social media – especially on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Finally, state media's digital arms have also become influential to amplify government messaging.⁸ Institutionally, the Information Networks Security Agency (INSA) and the Ethiopian Artificial Intelligence Institute (EAIL) engage in coordinated inauthentic behaviour to proliferate pro-government messaging in digital spaces.⁹

Shaping information salience relies on several recurring tactics:

- **Discrediting allegations and sources:** The government and its supporters routinely engage in dismissing allegations and denigrating sources. For instance, when Amnesty International released its highly influential report on a massacre that took place in the city of Axum in November 2021, pro-government actors campaigned against the organisation, trending #FakeAxumMassacre on the then Twitter and targeting Amnesty for the reporting.¹⁰ The government and its supporters also attempted to sow suspicion regarding the sources of information by labelling the refugees Amnesty interviewed for its report as unreliable.
- **Denial and alternative explanations:** When reports of Eritrean troops being active in Ethiopia in support of the Ethiopian government emerged in early stages of the Tigray war, the Ethiopian government's online campaign claimed it is Tigrayan fighters disguising themselves in Eritrean army's fatigue, based on a claim directly made by an Ethiopian army official.¹¹
- **Distraction and blame-shifting:** Distracting from the story by shifting attention and blame to external actors is routinely used. On occasion, pro-government online campaigns have attempted to deepen divisions and prevent consolidation of opponents
- **Agenda setting and narrative control:** Agenda setting is designed to set the tone of online conversations, deflect from substantive socio-economic discussions, and ensure that all conversations revolve around the government's own messaging.
- **Flooding and saturation:** Mirroring Steve Bannon's 'flooding the zone with shit'¹² and the CCPs practice of '50 cent army'¹³, this is especially visible in efforts to dominate comment sections on Facebook, where the digital army members post coordinated and identical messages to dominate top comments.

- **Issue and identity framing:** controlling the narrative regarding the conflicts in the country has been a key concern. The government's flagship projects, such as Addis Ababa Corridor Project, have also become an important source of visual propaganda. Recently, access to the Red Sea and a port have been an important part of pro-government propaganda. The media army focuses on building a personality cult around the Prime Minister. Most of these agenda have taken on an increasingly nationalist rhetoric.

Strategic Objectives

While the government has put substantial effort and resources to enhance its digital presence and manipulate the information ecosystem in its favour, its efforts have not been very conspicuous. The media army is not very successful in terms of convincing citizens to support government initiatives. Citizens often recognise it, with identical messages posted by members of the media army occasionally becoming subjects of ridicule.

Despite this, the government continues to deploy the same strategy. This is a result of two interrelated reasons. First, even if it doesn't convince, such coordinated efforts overwhelm dissenting voices and dilute critical narratives, thereby choking the digital public sphere. Part of the reason is also performative loyalty, as participation in digital campaigns and supporting government positions online have been associated with performance evaluation and promotions. At the Woreda level, for instance, officials are evaluated based on their performance in the digital army.¹⁴ Cadres and civil servants participating in these initiatives are thus simply performing what is expected of them so as to secure their positions and privileges.

Overall, the government's pivot to suppressing the salience of information represents a form of authoritarian adaptation. It represents an attempt to dominate society through digital presence, as well as undermine dissent and opposition by flooding, diverting, and exhausting political discourse. It allows the government to distract from tangible issues that need addressing, such as conflict and socio-economic crisis, and as such, can be seen as strategic distraction.¹⁵

Notes

¹ የብልፅግና ፓርቲ 'የሚዲያ ሠራዊት' አባላት በሐሰተኛ መረጃ ሥርጭት እና አሳሳች የፌስቡክ ዘመቻዎች ላይ መሳተፍቸውን የቢቢሲ ምርመራ አረጋገጠ www.bbc.com/amharic/articles/cp6gnd20675o

² የአቢይ ሚዲያ ሠራዊትና የስለላ መዋቅር, Horn Conversation (YouTube) www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEnZxjW13L4&t=8261s April 30, 2025.

³ J04 - Interview - Journalist, international media, reporting on Ethiopia. 16, January, 2025, Addis Ababa.

⁴ Yohannes Buayalew, a long serving government official arrested in connection with the conflict in Amhara, claimed in court that Seyoum is "a government activist, appointed by the state, paid a salary by the state, and provided with a vehicle and security" tinyurl.com/26chtt33. Else where, prominent journalists have exposed that government activists earn as much as 240,000 birr per month (1900 USD) - x.com/EliasMeseret/status/1915451711503622198

⁵ See press.et/?p=112092. The list included Seyoum Teshome, Natnael Mekonnen, Abebe Tola (Abe Tokchaw).

⁶ J05 - Interview - Journalist and commentator - 22 Jan 2025, Addis Ababa.

⁷ While the castles of Gonder were renewed, the government allegedly flew influencers to visit, in an attempt to claim that all is normal in Gonder, despite an insurgency in the Amhara region.

⁸ FBC has 4 million followers on Facebook, while EBC has 4.1 million followers.

⁹ See Meta (June 2021). Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from Ethiopia. about.fb.com/news/2021/06/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-ethiopia/ Also see የአቢይ ሚዲያ ሠራዊትና የስለላ መዋቅር, Horn Conversation (YouTube) www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEnZxjW13L4&t=8261s April 30, 2025.

¹⁰ Check Ethiopia Press Agency (state media) reporting on the effort to discredit Amnesty www.facebook.com/epaEnglish/photos/a.420894541816571/873099136596107/?type=3

¹¹ Ethiopia Current Issues Fact Check [@ETFactCheck], X (formerly Twitter), Nov. 13, 2020. x.com/ETFactCheck/status/1326781302092296193; www.ameco.et/10758/

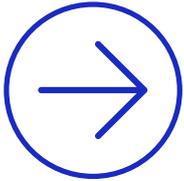
¹² “Flood the zone with shit”: How misinformation overwhelmed our democracy www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/1/16/20991816/impeachment-trial-trump-bannon-misinformation

¹³ Han, R. (2015). Manufacturing Consent in Cyberspace: China’s “Fifty-Cent Army”. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 44(2), 105-134. doi.org/10.1177/186810261504400205 (Original work published 2015)

¹⁴ J04 - Interview – Journalist, international media, reporting on Ethiopia. 16, January, 2025, Addis Ababa

¹⁵ King, G., Pan, J., & Roberts, M. E. (2017). How the Chinese government fabricates social media posts for strategic distraction, not engaged argument. *American political science review*, 111(3), 484-501.

¹⁶ Polyakova, A., & Meserole, C. (2019). Exporting digital authoritarianism: The Russian and Chinese models. *Policy brief, democracy and disorder series*, (August 2019), 1-22.



Policy recommendations

These changes are not unique to Ethiopia. Digital authoritarianism is on the rise, with authoritarian regimes utilising digital tools and mechanisms “to control, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations for the purposes of power consolidation”. The ability of outside actors, including the European Union, to radically influence these processes is extremely limited. However, it is possible to engage critically and constructively to reduce the damaging effects of such digital authoritarian practices and enhance information freedom. In dealing with the Ethiopian state’s information manipulation efforts, the following are essential:

- **Pressure:**
 - Pressure the Ethiopian government to honour its constitutional and international commitments to protect freedom of expression.
 - Tie support to the Ethiopian government, especially technology-related development support, with transparency about the government’s use of technology.
- **Recognition:** recognise and/or condemn suppression of information of salience as a form of human rights violation.
- **Support:** Increase support for fact-checking, digital literacy, independent journalism, and civil society in Ethiopia.
- **Public exposure:** publishing reports detailing pro-government information manipulation and narratives so as to leverage its reputational effect.
- **Knowledge:** enhance knowledge production on authoritarian information manipulation in Ethiopia, to complement the skewed understanding of the phenomenon which is largely based on the experiences of China and Russia.

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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