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Digital warfare transforming political rhetoric: social media (ab)use and the Ethiopia war of 2020-2022

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DIGITAL WARFARE TRANSFORMING POLITICAL RHETORIC: SOCIAL MEDIA (AB)USE AND THE ETHIOPIA WAR OF 2020-2022

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Abstract: This article analyses key aspects of the armed conflict during the so-called "Tigray War" of 2020-2022 in northern Ethiopia, focusing on the "digital warfare" that accompanied it. I argue that the physical war was enhanced by its digital media representation, which negatively impacted (global) media reporting. Via an analysis of repeated aggressive and loaded digital memes I describe (digital) political rhetoric and its loose relation to verifiable facts on the ground. A discursive domain of misinformation and semi-fictitious appearances was created that perpetuated conflict and made open, truth-oriented fact-finding difficult: current digital media allow political rhetoric to massively go beyond the conventions of shared discursive exchange. The case study shows that beyond the analysis of digital and news media products new ways have to be found to "reality-check" or reduce these representations to themes amenable for public dialogue and eventual shared compromise.

Keywords: armed conflict, political rhetoric, digital warfare, social media, Ethiopian politics, ethnic politics

Introduction[1]

In this article I give a flashback on social media dis- and misinformation efforts perpetrated in the 2020-2022 "Tigray War" in northern Ethiopia and analyse their nature and impact. Social media utterances during that conflict and its aftermath became a form of quotidian political rhetoric of digitally active Ethiopians – first by the insurgents (of the TPLF, or Tigray Peoples Liberation Front[2]) and their sympathisers, and later to a lesser extent by the federal government and its supporters – as well as by foreigners following the country's conflict or doing advocacy work. In conjunction to studying

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1 I thank the three referees of Modern Africa for their critical comments on an earlier version of this paper. Final editing was done in December 2025.

2 I cite the name here not in the correct spelling ("People's") but in the manner that the TPLF members and most analysts always cite it.

their rhetoric, one needs to assess the global mainstream (printed) news media and their role, as they often tuned in to such social media discourse with a remarkable lack of due diligence and fact-checking of their own. This was done in a manner reminiscent of Western journalists in the 1930s Soviet Union who were duped and fêted by the repressive authorities, and neglected their professional duty to report reliably or truthfully.[3] In the Ethiopian case, due to the interaction of digital and actual warfare, and the involvement (or, one might also say, constant meddling) of multiple foreign parties, it is difficult to present a full analysis and explanation of the chain of events in this exceedingly complex war and of the devious rhetoric surrounding it - and this article only scratches the surface.

The central research question is: how did "digital activism" transform political rhetoric via social media during the Ethiopia war of 2020-2022 and impact the discursive representation of backgrounds and motives of the war in global news media reporting and policy responses?

Political rhetoric is of all times, with the first written records reflecting on it dating from the Ancient Greeks (Gagarin 2019) and it constitutes an essential discursive element in the political arena in both democratic and dictatorial forms. However, in the early 21st century its use and abuse have intensified due to cyberspace domains, often becoming manipulated and subversive due to the massively expanded use of social media exchanges, which are marginally monitored, well-networked, and moving fast via algorithmic replication. Discursive disruption, up to and including hate speech[4] and active conspiracy thinking, is rampant, due to the opportunity of users to launch (dis-)information and extreme personal views, often to sophistically mislead, intimidate, or intimidate others. While these processes indicate a "democratization" of the means of expression and of "free speech" and are not only negative, they tend to endanger ordered democratic polities (Haidt 2022) as well as reasonable discourse, and also (the acceptance of) scientific insights and truth-finding (McIntyre 2018).

3 The classic case is New York Times's Walter Duranty's "journalism" in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=BqnfmCu6fUk and www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6vye5DDqTo.

4 Definitions of hate speech vary, but I following Howard (2019: 96), citing Parekh's 2021 description: "… hate speech [..] is directed against a specified or easily identifiable individual or, more commonly, a group of individuals based on an arbitrary or normatively irrelevant feature"; second, it "stigmatizes the target group by implicitly or explicitly ascribing to it qualities widely regarded as undesirable"; and third, it frames the "target group…as an undesirable presence and a legitimate object of hostility." Thus, even the existence of the hated individual/group is resented.

As has often been asserted,[5] messaging in digital spaces can contribute significantly to war mongering and even to translating discursive interventions into action. Often such messaging is coordinated (via bots) and derives its power from its affective dimension (Boler and Davis 2021). It thereby often perpetuates "enemy images" and prolongs conflict or warfare (Chiluwa 2019: 22 on Mali). I contend that this has been the case in the "Tigray War" in northern Ethiopia from 3 November 2020 to 2 November 2022: there was a transformative impact of digital and global mainstream news media[6] messages on the politics of conflict.

The theoretical approach in this article is informed by the comparative analysis of digitised identity politics, or what I call "political identitarianism" – which I define as a strategy of the rhetorically overstated self-identity presentation of a group (or rather its elite) for political purposes. It is pursued based on a (political, national, religious or ethnic) group's narrowly defined identity position and done via one-dimensional political rhetoric. Political anthropologists often recognise it as behaviour based on the in-group, the "tribal impulse", which has characterised humanity throughout its evolutionary history.[7] Remarkably, in current global politics this tribal element seems to make a political comeback. My specific hypothesis on the overwhelming negative and identity group-based social messaging is derived from Schöne et al. (2021): media like Twitter, Facebook or TikTok tend to strongly spread negativity in conflictuous political situations (despite also having positive aspects, e.g., in their function as news channels). As we see in other conflict settings, in digital spaces the production and exchange of adversarial identity discourse seem paramount and correlated with the *actual* development of conflicts (Pabón and Shifa 2022). This negativity effect (also highlighted in a recent 2024 NAS report, especially Chapter 4, and in US Surgeon General 2023: 6-10) may in part relate to the very nature of digital media itself, as its technological formula appears to *stimulate* it.

An underlying point of departure is that the study of digital media communication and its discursive tropes should *not* be merely descriptive – what it says, how it "works", what the online "networks" are, what

5 E.g., Moges Teshome. 2025. " 'The Road to Hell is Paved with Good Intentions': the Role of Facebook in Fuelling Ethnic Violence" (www.asc.upenn.edu/research/centers/milton-wolf-seminar-media-and-diplomacy/blog/road-hell-paved-good-intentions-role-facebook-fuelling-ethnic-violence).

6 I mean here CNN, BBC, Al-Jazeera, etc., press agencies like AP, AFP or Bloomberg, and newspapers like the New York Times, Washington Post, The Guardian, Le Monde, Daily Mail, etc.

7 That the "tribal" nature of human collectivities is resilient throughout human cultural history was convincingly demonstrated in the major study by prominent anthropologist Robin Fox (2011).

frequency certain themes have, etc. – but ultimately also be critical-evaluative of the assertions made in it. Its information and "truth claims" are to be comparatively assessed, not merely registered in their "persuasive" effects. This means meeting what I would call Gorgias's challenge, in Plato's dialogue (Norris 2017: 626): rhetoric for the sophist Gorgias was not concerned with the morally good or right judgement, but only with persuasion, via appeals to emotion, pleasing and charming the listeners, i.e., in an "entertaining" manner. I mention this ancient author to underline that the rhetoric of much of current social media is deeply political and self-centred, and as such is nothing new in human discourse: it seamlessly fits in with Gorgias's conception of "amoral", instrumental rhetoric. To draw only that conclusion is not enough (as Plato also noted): we need to keep in mind what "truth" is and how it can be ascertained (as best as possible, McIntyre 2018: 122). This question is becoming more relevant by the day, as we see that AI now is also brought to bear in digital misinformation and propaganda battles (Nelu 2024).

Methodologically this article is based on studying a collection of several thousand digital reactions/responses to the conflict from both the TPLF and its activists as well as from "pro-Ethiopian government" accounts (to a lesser extent, because they were fewer in number). Also, global news media reporting was followed and collected. Methods to study Twitter data are developed since at least 2013 (Kim et al. 2013). I gathered the primary digital material during the two years of the conflict and after. Collecting masses of tweets is not difficult (Ohme et al. 2024), but the selection and analysis is. I targeted thematic keyword searches and followed the messages with high numbers of retweets, then selected the recurring sites and senders that contributed to commenting on the conflict in an explicit "political" way and which were also referred to or reappearing in comments, website articles or in even written news media reports. I compared and evaluated these data during some six months of study of the tweets related to the thematic headings treated below (#"Tigray genocide", and following). I do not claim to have made a complete quantitative analysis on these materials.

Summary of the Conflict in Northern Ethiopia, 2020-2022

The enormous production of articles, papers and blog pieces on this northern Ethiopia (Tigray) conflict(s) often obscures the basic facts. This in itself is an aim of these multiple (social) media products: cultivating obfuscation and "both-sideism", neglecting historical-political context, pushing memes

to redefine the "narrative", and speculating about its unresolved aftermath in countless "expert commentaries".

The conflict of 2020-2022 in northern Ethiopia had its antecedents in the ethnic-based political system of the country, installed in 1991 under the then incoming TPLF-EPRDF regime, which made "ethnic identity" a requisite in political life and accorded great autonomy (with the "right to secession") of ethno-linguistic groups (*behéreseboch*), and also opened an avenue for new ethnic elites to establish themselves. The divisive aspects of the model have been much commented upon in the scholarly literature. In April 2018, Dr Abiy Ahmed, the candidate of the Oromo section of the then still ruling party EPRDF,[8] became prime minister. He announced a "reform agenda" and gradually ousted representatives of the deeply unpopular TPLF elite from key positions in government. Tensions rapidly escalated, with the TPLF resenting the loss of its hold on power. It refused to cooperate with the new PM and objected to the delay of the May 2020 national parliamentary election (justifiably postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic). The TPLF held the elections for the Tigray regional parliament (where it was the only party standing) and no longer recognised the power of the new PM beyond 2020. Mutual threats were made between federal government and the TPLF regional government. The largest part of the Ethiopian federal army was then still stationed in Tigray (including heavy weapons), due to the aftermath of the unresolved conflict with Eritrea after the 1998-2000 war.

Violence started on 3 November 2020, initiated by the TPLF with a nightly surprise attack on federal soldiers on five army bases in Tigray, with ca. 3 to 4,000 killed, many others injured, mutilated and abused. The details of this attack and its aftermath were discussed in many Ethiopian news outlets and publications. A telling survivor account of this attack is Gashaye's harrowing book *The Betrayed Northern Command* (2022). During the attack, the TPLF (and likely later also the federal government) cut off Internet and Telecom connections, and took over the federal army's heavy weapons. The TPLF thus tried to re-establish national prominence by attempting control of the federal army and thereby implicitly aimed at regaining federal power (as was substantiated in its attempts to move towards Addis Ababa in 2021). On 4 November 2020 the rest of the federal army was ordered by PM Abiy to start the counterattack, to "restore the federal constitutional order". After three weeks of fighting, it had pushed back the TPLF forces. It did, however, not occupy Tigray and "finish the job", but installed a Tigrayan-led

8 The "Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front".

interim government. This did not prevent the resurgence of the TPLF, which then entered the neighbouring Amhara and Afar Regions in a devastating campaign, with tens of thousands killed, including massive numbers of civilians. Huge damage was done to infrastructures, crops and livestock, educational institutions and businesses. The fighting raged on until October 2022, with three intensive rounds of battle (November to December 2020; June to December 2021; and May to October 2022), and with shocking abuses perpetrated on both sides. In the counter-offensive, Tigray Region was badly hit. In late 2022, negotiations in South Africa under the auspices of the African Union (and with meddling by the US Administration of Joe Biden) led to a 2 November 2022 Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA), which stipulated disarmament of the TPLF, humanitarian aid and rehabilitation for all civilians affected, and restoration of the federal state order (among others): effectively a surrender of the TPLF. But the TPLF movement was not dismantled, its leaders were not prosecuted in court, the rehabilitation of war-affected communities was negligible, and no overall inclusive political settlement was reached, neither for Tigray nor for Ethiopia as a whole (Abbink 2024).

Real War and Digital War

While this two-year war (November 2020-November 2022) between the Ethiopian federal government army and the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front is over since the CoHA was signed on 2 November 2022, its devastating impact is still felt four years after. Ethiopia is slow in recovering, despite its government and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed giving heads-up messages about political stabilisation, economic recovery, massive tree-planting, GERD-dam lake filling, foreign investments, etc. The economic problems are huge, armed conflict has resurfaced in the Oromia and Amhara regions, poverty is again growing, political turmoil continues in Tigray, and the material and psychological damage of the war and the shocking way it was conducted is serious and not properly addressed: no accountability yet. Indeed, social media and propaganda battles seen during the war even appear to continue, because real "reconciliation", peace, or recovery have not been achieved. A new armed conflict was opened by the federal government in the Amhara region in April 2023, trying to incorporate local militias that had contributed to the battles against TPLF into the federal army. The fact that in precarious states – such as Ethiopia – the Internet is frequently cut off by the national telecom providers (Xynou and Filastò 2023) has not made

much difference, as inventive methods are used (beyond VPN detours) to circulate messages across the country and beyond.

Social media contestation and cyberwarfare are often referred to in the case of Ethiopia, but serious studies of it are rare, especially when we look at the issues of political and sociological evaluation of the narratives and of the (lack of) arguments about the armed conflict.[9] There are quantitative studies that used API (application programming interface) when analysing X-Twitter, and/or web scraping, and these studies – few of good quality – usually come up with inventories of themes and memes in the cyber battlefronts. They rarely offer a problem-oriented, focused analysis of a *representative* body of positions and arguments based on critical fact-evaluation (Pennycook et al. 2021) or on how this feeds back into actual conflict. In this article I tried to do the latter but recognise the limitations; it is not API-based[10] and theme-selective but it gives a critical survey of representative and influential positions taken in the cyber warfare on Ethiopia.[11] The focus here is mainly on material from X-Twitter and on rhetorical positions presented by pro-TPLF activists.[12]

It is striking that militant activism on social media regarding Ethiopia's armed conflicts (especially on X-Twitter, and in the past two years increasingly on TikTok) was well-coordinated and punched above its weight. Despite the shaky and biased approaches in the messaging, it had an inordinate impact on global news media and policy-makers in the West (the "donor countries") influenced by its misinformation and incorrect memes – thus delaying a solution for the armed conflict (Abbink 2021a-b). This impact was especially pertinent from the side of the pro-TPLF activists and their

9 A note on digital media use in Ethiopia: in 2024 there were 24.83 million Internet users (i.e., a penetration of 194.4 %). There were 7.05 million social media users, i.e., only 5.5 % of the total population (this increases every year with 0.5 to 1 %). There were some 77.39 million cell mobile connections active in Ethiopia (60.4 % of the population, growing fast).(Source: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-ethiopia).

10 API (application programming interface) can no longer be freely used on Twitter since ca. February 2023: the costs now make research "to extract and process large amounts of data" (Caulfield 2023: 225) much more difficult and time-consuming.

11 While this article limits itself to the "Tigray-conflict", initiated by the TPLF on 3-4 November 2020 and formally ended on 2 November 2022 with the "Cessation of Hostilities Agreement" signed in Pretoria (Abbink 2023), serious armed conflicts in the country are continuing in the Oromia and Amhara regions between 2023 and 2025. These conflicts are also accompanied by negative and hateful social media communication but will not be extensively discussed here.

12 There are indications that over the past few years Ethiopian users now are favouring TikTok more than X-Twitter (see: https://ethiopianbusinessreview.net/ethiopians-getting-taste-of-tiktok-phenomenon; and https://hypetrace.com/top/tiktok/ethiopia/), mostly for the private or so-called funny videoclips, and often with the underlying aim to generate money. However, a pioneering analysis of political TikTok messaging regarding the "Tigray War" was done by Cozzatella and Roden 2023.

supporters. This activist social media messaging contributed to create a narrative in the global press and policy circles, whereby the TPLF and Tigray Region and its people were framed as "the underdog" and "at the receiving end" of all human rights abuses in the conflict – despite the fact that TPLF had started it with a massive and lethal surprise attack on 3-4 November 2020 and majorly contributed to the abuse. Comparable attention to similar and often worse problems that emerged in the wake of TPLF's offensives in Amhara and Afar regions has been lacking, that is, are under-reported.

Digital Warfare and Politics

The effects of "digital warfare" have strongly impacted Ethiopians in- and outside Ethiopia and perpetuated enemy images, disinformation narratives and frequently hate speech. This still hinders the (re-)establishment of durable stability and peace and is problematic for the political future of Ethiopia after the 2022 CoHA agreement: trust has been declining, and perceptions of group tension and problematic "nation-building" continue. Basically, this situation is a result of decades of ideologically buttressed "ethnic-based" politics, entrenched in the Ethiopian political system and public psyche since 1991. The socio-political effects of this constitutionally anchored model of doing politics (in the 1995 Constitution) were underestimated, but they have defined a new "political culture" of division and identity politics that has not yet delivered an integrative (multi-)nation building. For most Ethiopians – traditionally connected across ethnicity in social, cultural, and religious networks and with an ethos of "getting along" despite differences – such a fragmented future is "too ghastly to contemplate". It appears only to be (economically) attractive for self-appointed ethnic-group elites, which were fostered if not produced by the post-1991 political dispensation, and who – as the recent war and still ongoing violent conflicts in Ethiopia demonstrate – had notably failed.[13]

13 An additional problem is the self-serving behaviour of (new) ethno-elites. A recent example reported is the apparently substantial corruption and self-enrichment of the elite of the Sidama Region, a new regional state declared in November 2019 (Abera et al. 2025). Frequent press and popular Ethiopian social media also mentioned it (www.thereporterethiopia.com/41963/; www.youtube.com/live/D8Arw4Bk6tc?feature=share, at 13.30', and https://borkena.com/2023/10/20/ethiopia-sidama-over-100-government-officials-including-regional-security-chief-arrested-for-theft-of-25000-quintals-of-fertilizer/). Similar oral reports on the expansion of corruption, bribery and nepotism are heard from other regions, such as Gambela, Addis Ababa and Oromia.

Complicating these issues is that certain political agendas have also been crafted and stimulated by "diaspora"-based academics, journalists and activists of Ethiopian origin in Europe, the USA and elsewhere (Tessema and Eyassu 2023). Many of them – and including their non-Ethiopian fellow travellers – tend to be "ethno-nationalist" and produce radical, exclusionary and even violent views on local ethno-communal relations in Ethiopia, on which they comment from their comfortable homes abroad. But they have a detrimental impact on the country's public discourse and social fabric.

Digital Rhetoric in Social Media: More Conflict than Conciliation

No country escapes the shaping influence of digital media and "developing countries" are no exception. This section discusses some of its key features. In some countries the vehemence of political and communal debate or conflict is aggravated by these media. As we know from a growing body of research, the uninhibited and unmonitored venting of instant opinions online is not bringing people together but creating enemy-friend lines in the classic Schmittian sense (Schmitt 1963: 26-27), splitting the political community. Paradoxically, the enlightened ideal of free speech allegedly cherished by online communicators more often than not tends to turn into intimidation contests that undermine the informed exchange of ideas and views for a common aim or shared political space.

One may observe that digital spaces are by nature non-deliberative, iterative, non-mediated and, as mentioned above, often move toward a subversion of democracy (Haidt 2022).[14] This is enhanced by the fact that social media language is usually anonymous, non-accountable, and produces instant, non-fact-checked messaging. Indeed, it is not facts but feelings and emotions that count. In the absence of agreed-upon standards of digital literacy or etiquette, and of acceptable on-line communication, the political influence of current social media use and abuse is becoming highly problematic and in fragile political orders this carries major risks.

The content moderation boards on YouTube, Meta's Facebook, TikTok and X-Twitter[15] are of limited value: they struggle with the issue (Brown and

14 See the interesting debate among experts on "Is Social Media Undermining Democracy?" at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGxZCNBS6fQ.

15 For example, content moderation by X-Twitter moderators – many of whom have been dismissed by the current X-Twitter owner Elon Musk since October 2022 – has been weak and inconsistent. Cf. www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-01-07/elon-musk-cuts-more-twitter-staff-overseeing-content-moderation#xj4y7vzkg). In January 2025, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced that his company would abolish "fact-checking" on Facebook and replace it by a "community notes" system (www.cbsnews.com/news/meta-facebook-instagram-fact-checking-mark-zuckerberg/).

Knight 2022) but their censoring incitement and misinformation is weak, and bias can be noted in their closing down certain accounts[16] after massive, targeted complaint campaigns by activists. In the period of the Tigray War discussed here, I noted that also YouTube, using equally unclear criteria, repeatedly deleted Ethiopian news accounts and critical videos, even when these were dismantling obvious fake news.

When analysing social media political rhetoric we see that it is not standard "political language" (Parkin 1984), but a comparatively new phenomenon of discourse producing its *own* standards (or lack thereof): a new language, for which, as I noted above, no mutually accepted, positive and efficient communicative standards have yet been developed or internalised. The "relevance" of its utterances is determined by personal biases, "feelings", and "motivated reasoning" (i.e., selective reasoning based on "arguments" or data only supporting one's own pre-established point of view; see Mercier and Sperber 2011: 66). The discourse is certainly *not* guided by what Paul Grice, in his pathbreaking work on language and conversation, has called the "cooperative principle" underlying verbal communication that is guided by a number of rules (Grice 1989: 26). Social media discourse relating to conflict tends to enhance polemics and imposition via its usually emotive, direct style, and its going beyond the bounds of the (more accommodative) norms and practices of local communities affected by the conflict at hand. This has meant, also in Ethiopian online communications in which aims of deliberation and discussion to *resolve* conflict are bypassed, that there is neither much attention to the possible role of existing local, grass-roots structures (e.g., traditional dispute mediation norms and institutions) in addressing and containing conflicts.

The "Creative" Force of Digital Messaging

Digital media messaging redefines and/or re-creates the perception and framing of reality by forging discursive communities of like-minded adherents, reinforced by well-known algorithmic effects. This happens notably on X-Twitter, YouTube, or Facebook, and rapidly increases on TikTok, although the content of the latter is still more "entertainment" and self-presentation. In this messaging there is no self-questioning and no dialoguing aim. The production of emotive and reactive messages is enough, reinforced by trolling and targeting, whereby much of the impact – e.g., of

16 See www.nasdaq.com/articles/facebook-removes-what-it-says-is-fake-ethiopia-account-network-ahead-of-election-2021-06.

X-Twitter – is due to it almost occurring in "real time". As reverse image-searching on the web reveals, incomplete and falsified images are frequently used,[17] and disinformation is made easy, in line with "motivated reasoning".

The effect is the shaping of conformist "communities", based on algorithm-driven numbers of clicks and reposts of related, self-confirming images and "data", or also the targeting of individuals and other "communities". This is important because waves of social media (dis-)information generated by the process (Haidt 2022; see also Harari 2018) often have a deluding impact on mainstream *global* news media outlets such as (in our case) CNN, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or *Al Jazeera*. There is a growing number of cases demonstrating this effect (for Ethiopia, see Sonderriis 2023 for numerous instances). Research on social media messaging on the Ethiopia conflict(s) was often taken in by this effect and found wanting (one example of substandard work was Wilmot et al. 2021).[18]

What makes the global mainstream news media (and also "donor country" diplomacy, cf. Abbink 2021a) susceptible for such conformistic, repetitive narratives? First, these (global) media do not all have good correspondents on the ground in the developing countries in conflict; Western correspondents are neither well-versed in local languages and context, and there is often reliance on local people who are strongly affiliated to one or the other party in the conflicts covered, and there is no proper checking of the messages produced. Second, when African situations are covered they are deemed less important than cases elsewhere (cf. the fixation on the Middle East, Ukraine, China and Southeast Asia), and this means less accuracy and depth. Third, the human rights framework is often used as primary criterion to judge regimes and countries and their policies. This perspective has serious limitations (Fox 2011: 41-55): inconsistency, paternalism, lack of sufficient information, and bias towards allies whatever their regime form.

In the 2020-2022 war Ethiopia indeed had two battle fronts: the actual fighting and the digital discursive warfare. The two were even coordinated, especially on the side of the insurgent TPLF, with activists in the US (such as the "Tigray Media House" YouTube channel and many individual but networked accounts), in Tigray ("Dimtsi Weyane" broadcasting, and the "Tigray Mass Media Agency", both under the regional TPLF government), and in Tigrayan

17 One example: www.misbar.com/en/factcheck/2021/11/16/video-of-downed-ethiopian-helicopter-is-from-2020-in-syria (accessed 16 November 2021).

18 For interesting critical commentary on social media (dis-)information, see twitter.com/Qnie_Addis/status/1448006326483918854).

"diasporas" in Canada and Europe. This digital warfare became a powerful, even creative, rhetorical register that partly (re-)shaped the course of the conflict and the international responses – right up to the signing on 2 November 2022 of the Cessation of Hostilities agreement between the fighting parties. Since then, the conflict rhetoric has subsided but not entirely stopped – notably "diaspora" Tigrayans and their Western supporters (among them, several academics) continued the (social) media warfare and new conflict fronts have been added. Government supporters and other ethno-regional activists have also joined the digital fray. As the 2 November 2022 "Pretoria Agreement", signed by the Ethiopian federal government and the TPLF with the insistence of the USA and under the auspices of the African Union, was not universally popular in Ethiopia, and did not lead to the full disarmament and neutralisation of the TPLF, critics not only of the TPLF but also of the Ethiopian federal government have stepped up their messaging campaigns.

Growing Power of Digital Political Rhetoric in Ethiopia

Surveying the domain of digital space and activism in Ethiopia since the early 2010s, we see that digital/social media rhetoric was less antagonistic in the early years (Gagliardone et al. 2015, on elections) and more geared to entertainment and broader cultural, social and also personal issues, as reflected on the first popular digital medium: Facebook. But the parameters and antecedents of rhetoric conflict were present: Ethiopian politics were a highly contested domain since the 1970s, with serious political differences sharpening during and after the 1974 Revolution. Leftist, Marxist parties and ethno-nationalist rebel groups emerged and engaged in sectarian battles. Labelling, scapegoating and group recrimination were visible in the discourse of the Derg military government (1974-1991) against "feudal elites", "class opponents" and "national chauvinists"; in the TPLF's first manifesto (1976) blaming "the Amhara" for all evils and later in its divisive state politics; and in other ethnicist insurgent movement manifestos. After gaining power in Ethiopia, the TPLF (core party of the EPRDF, ruling from 1991-2018) aggravated identity-based conflict by "ethnicising" politics in law and in practice (Ayele et al. 2023) and continued to accuse past "Amhara elites" of "repression" and "hegemonism".

Following global trends, hate speech has also emerged in Ethiopia and erupted *before* the armed conflict of 2020-2022 in the form of ethnicised speech against other population groups (Wubetu and Salau 2022; Tadesse and Tilahun 2019; Tadesse and Abebaw 2023). Hate speech and false rumours repeatedly led to killings and attacks on property. One notorious

instance was the rioting after the killing of popular Ethiopian Oromo singer Hachalu Hundesa in June 2020, which was started via ethnic incitement on social media (Facebook, Twitter), and via a big private media network in Ethiopia. Hachalu was apparently killed by Oromo ethno-nationalists,[19] but it was blamed on non-Oromo, predominantly Amharic-speaking people, and it led to 123 people being killed in gross violence (EHRC 2022a).

Time and again we see that the persuasive power of digital rhetoric resides in its mono-voiced online community structure (self-selection buttressed by algorithms) and in its non-mediated, non-refereed discursive spaces. "Educated" elites of Ethiopian background, residing partly abroad and differentiated in economic standing and geographic location, were able to exercise their often-dubious influence on political discourse in the country. They thereby contributed to a break with the Ethiopian community-based, quotidian traditions regarding the use of "healing language", of customary mediation forums, and of deliberative discourse in local settings (Endalew 2014). Social media-using people in Ethiopia – as in any country – are easily seduced by the misinformation and incitements on their timelines and accounts, and younger audiences hardly consult written media or bother to "check sources". Education systems in training people in digital skills, would ultimately have to play a much larger role here. Furthermore, in Ethiopia the monitoring (CARD 2022) and law enforcement on digital incitement and hate speech is uneven or inefficient. In the following sections I will illustrate some key instances of digital rhetoric in Ethiopia.

Social Media Memes Relating to the 2020-22 Ethiopia Conflict and their Impact on Global Media Reporting and Political Decision-Makers[20]

During the 2020-22 Ethiopia conflict, the prime influential "memes" or talking points generated by social media accounts percolating through to global print media and policy circles of "donor countries" were the following: "Tigray genocide"; "(man-made) famine"; "humanitarian blockade"; "mass rape as a weapon of war", and "targeting of civilians"/"massacres" – all allegedly carried out on Tigrayan people in the Tigray Regional State (TRS). While the level of abuse in this war was serious on all sides (JIT Report 2021; EHRC 2022b), the veracity of the claims made under the above five labels – declared relevant in the Tigray Region only –

19 See: "Manhunt for Hachalu's killer afoot", The Reporter, 11 July 2020 (available at: www.thereporterethiopia.com/9903, accessed 11 May 2024).

20 A host of entries regarding the Tigray War has been posted on Wikipedia that seem to be re-edited time and again by a pro-TPLF taskforce. None of these entries can be regarded as reliable.

was doubtful.[21] Indeed, post-war reports seem to have largely (not entirely) refuted them. We will look at each of these five claims in turn.

Example 1: "#Tigray Genocide"

In the night of 3-4 November 2020, the armed conflict started in northern Ethiopia (Tigray Region) with the TPLF's attack on federal soldiers (Gashaye 2022). On the same day, 4 November 2020 at 02:35 p.m., a digital "#TigrayGenocide" campaign started with a first tweet – while no Tigrayan had died yet.[22] The second tweet came out 11 minutes later. This meme was then reproduced and multiplied for the entire two years of the conflict.[23]

While there was evidence of serious abuse in all war-affected areas since December 2020 (as was described in a Joint Report of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and the UN Human Rights Commissioner, see JIT Report 2021), evidence of a genocide – in the international law sense[24] – was absent and never produced.[25]

Still global media, including those considered reputable (BBC, CNN, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*), Western commentators, certain TPLF-linked academics, and countless websites took over this meme – and even influenced policy-makers in the US and the EU, some of them re-tweeting it. Careful comparative fact-checking on its veracity was not carried out.[26]

After the 2 November 2022 Peace Agreement was signed, the presence of this meme on genocide in social media declined. A leading TPLF general (Tadesse Worede) admitted in an interview of February 2023 that there had been no case of "genocide" in Tigray.[27] But the damage was done: the global press and numerous Western activists and even academics had uncritically spread the meme, producing serious bias. Ironically, in most of their contributions, the mass killings of Amhara and Afar civilians (in arbitrary executions and destruction of villages) in areas invaded in early 2021 by the TPLF during this war were hardly ever referred to in these global media.

21 For example, see BBC 2021. The BBC was frequently guilty of spreading unchecked or misleading news, and hosted guest commentators on the conflict who for many Ethiopians were skewed towards the TPLF cause.

22 See https://t.co/9IpOUosd2H.

23 See https://abren.org/premeditated-tigray-genocide-cyber-warfare-in-the-age-of-social-media/ for a critical analysis.

24 Cf. www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml

25 See also www.getfactet.org/post/the-premeditated-tigray-genocid-campaign.

26 See What is #TigrayGenocide all about? FACT-CHECK – Awasa Guardian.

27 See https://twitter.com/affairs_horn/status/1622431497197162501.

Example 2: "Famine in Tigray"

In early 2021, pro-TPLF activists spread prolific messaging on a "man-made famine" that was "targeting the Tigrayans". While due to the conflict food security was seriously compromised since November 2020 and people in Tigray (and elsewhere) started to suffer major food deficits and dire scarcity, there was big doubt about a full-blown "famine", because no masses of people perished of starvation. Social media and global press reports repeated the phrase until late 2022, always citing "local sources" (i.e., mostly TPLF operatives in Tigray). No clear evidence was produced. Steven Omamo, head of the Word Food Programme (WFP) in Ethiopia during the conflict with first-hand field experience, concluded in a revealing memoir that the official definition of "famine" was not applicable to Tigray in 2021-2022. While the food insecurity situation was real, "there was no sign at all of famine. […] There was no evidence at all of anyone dying of hunger. None. Zero" (Omamo 2022: 59-60). Similar problems of food deficits emerged in the Amhara and Afar regions after May 2021 and again in August 2022, due to renewed TPLF attacks, occupation, theft and destruction of food supplies. They caused suffering but were not reported in the media in an equal manner.

After the 2 November 2022 peace deal was signed, no new evidence of a famine then or now in Tigray has emerged. But food deficits continued to exist and were partly alleviated via intensified aid convoys by the Ethiopian government and the WFP. Serious problems also persisted among many 100,000s of internally displaced persons (IDPs) across northern Ethiopia, notably Amhara and Afar Regions, until today (September 2025).

Example 3: "Humanitarian and Communications Blockade" (of the Tigray Region)

The accusation that the Tigray Region was purposely cordoned off and subject to a blockade of supplies of any kind was repeated time and again. This meme was closely linked to the famine accusation.

While the humanitarian situation in Tigray was dire *before* the war started in November 2020 (with ca. 950,000 Tigrayans needing aid),[28] pro-TPLF-social media campaigning stressed the "purposeful blockading" of the region by federal government forces, thus playing into the usual human rights international discourse tropes cherished by Western policy-makers and news media.

28 See: https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-tigray-region-humanitarian-update-situation-report-30-march-2021.

Fact was that the Ethiopian government and the WFP and other partners tried to get aid and other supplies through to Tigray as much as possible (although not enough), as testified in the period after the initial victory of federal forces in December 2020 and later again when these forces *left* Tigray in May 2021, leaving behind large quantities of food and fuel, and seeds to be used by farmers for the new agrarian season. But the intensified fighting by TPLF forces since May 2022 closed off entire areas and all main roads into Tigray. In addition, food convoy trucks moving into Tigray were checked because according to Ethiopian authorities various non-Ethiopian aid organisation vehicles (including those of the UNDP) seemed to smuggle in unauthorised goods and equipment into Tigray for use by the TPLF elite (as later documented; see also Abbink 2021a: 18-19 and 2021b: 2).

The frequent complaint about imposed communications and Internet black-out[29] rings hollow, because there are strong indications that TPLF forces in the night of 3-4 November 2020 cut these communications before their attack on federal army camps. Notably, army radio communications services were also disabled (there is video evidence of armed men entering the Ethio-Telecom core office in the capital Meqele).[30] Equally, there was a huge number of cyberattacks on Ethio-Telecom in the first weeks of the war, targeting federal telecom, including in Tigray.[31] And in the first six months of the war (up to May 2021), when a federal-supported provisional regional government was installed in Meqele, dozens of technicians to repair the lines were killed and connections again severed. By 2 December 2020 the federal authorities had started reconnecting the Tigray Region.[32]

Despite the social media campaigns pushing the story, there is little evidence that a purposeful and systematic "humanitarian blockade" on Tigray was pursued. It would be unclear what advantage it would have brought to the federal government to do so, because the latter wanted to win over the Tigrayan population to its side. Despite that, however, there is no doubt that the quantities of humanitarian and other aid that reached Tigray (as well as Amhara and Afar) were insufficient and held up for long inspections, and

29 Since 01.00 a.m. on 3 November 2020, according to this source: https://netblocks.org/reports/internet-disrupted-in-ethiopia-as-conflict-breaks-out-in-tigray-region-eBOQYV8Z.

30 See: https://www.ethiopiancitizen.com/2020/12/cctv-footage-shows-tplf-men-disabling-telecom-network.html, and: "Ethio telecom says service lines to Mekelle cleaved", The Reporter, 12 December 2020 (https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/ethio-telecom-says-service-lines-mekelle-cleaved).

31 See: https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2020/12/11/full-resumption-of-services-in-tigray-may-take-time-says-ethio-telecom/.

32 See: www.africanews.com/2020/12/02/ethio-telecom-restores-services-to-parts-of-tigray-official/.

that the speed of reconnecting the region to the telecom grid was notably hampered.

A further irony is that during 2020-2022 TPLF forces themselves repeatedly confiscated food aid that reached the Tigray Region and meant for ordinary people. An example: in March 2022 a unilateral ceasefire declared by the federal government was half-heartedly accepted by the TPLF, apparently so that food aid and fuel could get in. But they then took most of it for their own troops[33] and restarted the war on 24 August 2022.[34]

Example 4: "The Use of Rape as a Weapon of War" (Gender-based Violence)

The war saw multiple cases of rape of women, both of POWs and civilian women in Tigray as well as in the Amhara and Afar Regions (JIT 2021; FBC 2022). Details on numbers, locations and scale were unclear, however; as was the "systematic nature" of it. The assertion that Tigray's population was singled out and the target of systematic rape as a "weapon of war" was never substantiated by unambiguous data; still, this was amplified on social media accounts and pro-TPLF hashtags. In mid-2021 the Ethiopian authorities began charging dozens of federal army soldiers apprehended for rape. On the side of the TPLF or the Tigray government, no such cases have thus far been prosecuted, not even after the November 2022 Peace Agreement.[35]

Furthermore, in September 2021 a UN official working in Ethiopia admitted, in the face of social media accusations, that in Tigray the evidence of "mass rape" by Ethiopian and other troops was not substantial (Gramer and Lynch 2021).[36] It is doubtful that rape was consciously used as "a weapon of war" ordered by the army command of the federal Ethiopian forces. In 2022 more reports emerged that rape in the areas occupied by TPLF forces (Amhara, Afar) had been very serious, and systematic.[37] The tragic reality was that in

33 Cf. www.voanews.com/a/wfp-chief-alleges-tplf-stole-fuel-designated-for-humanitarian-use/6716378.html.

34 See www.reuters.com/world/africa/fighting-resumes-along-border-ethiopias-northern-tigray-region-resident-tigray-2022-08-24/.

35 As of November 2025, no cases were known.

36 Cp. http://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/27/united-nations-officials-downplayed-sexual-violence-ethiopia; also the Facebook post seen in twitter.com/althecat/status/1427755754094727168/photo/1).

37 See, e.g., https://twitter.com/AmharaWaag/status/1598673048919367680; https://twitter.com/hashtag/TDFRapists?src=hashtag_click; www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCVs5-iTwUw&t=3s. And with English subtitles: https://youtu.be/TpZE8TGg_zs; and https://twitter.com/Leah_ORG/status/1475468359793786885.

Tigray itself, rape by Tigrayan men on Tigrayan women, had been a serious problem well *before* the war started[38] – a fact conveniently ignored by most media. This does not excuse the occurrence of rape incidents in Tigray by armed forces during the war, but the perpetrators were from all sides.[39] Sadly, Tigray society, with a weak democratic tradition, inadequate justice system, and significant gender inequality, had a serious problem with an engrained pattern of gender violence long before the Tigray War of 2020-22.

Example 5: "Targeting of Civilians" / "Massacres"

The 2021 JIT report mentioned cases of abuse and transgressions on all sides (TPLF insurgents, federal troops, Eritrean forces). There is no doubt that civilian non-combatants on both sides were killed in the conflict. But there were significant differences.

Pro-TPLF social media messaging rapidly enumerated alleged cases of massacres of civilians in various towns and villages and even religious places. There were indeed abusive killings. The Federal Prosecutor in Addis Ababa examined dozens of cases and many perpetrators were convicted and sent to prison. For most reported cases, evidence was scant and ambivalent. The last word on this not said, but "massacre cases" in Tigray during the war that were examined in more detail appear to be exaggerated. All were hyped in the social media and extensively taken up in global news media, but unfortunately in misleading form. Five such instances are the following.

> – The highly contested case of Aksum town on 28 November 2020: social media and global press spread allegations of a targeted mass killing of locals, even with figures mentioned of over 750 civilians killed.[40] The dominant story became that hundreds of innocents had been killed in the city. This would reflect badly on the federal army – which appeared to be the purpose of all pro-TPLF messaging. However, a close analysis by writer Jeff Pearce and others disputed this on the basis of

38 Cf. the interview with Prof. Haregwoin Aseffa, herself of Tigrayan background, at twitter.com/xotrinx/status/1532529780771397641?cxt=HHwWkoCx6ejt0cQqAAAA). Also: https://t.co/32R8Vb47Sc; and https://africanfeminism.com/yikono-campaign-gives-ethiopian-women-the-language-to-challenge-violence/ - on Tigrayan women demonstrating against rape in 2019 and 2020 Also: www.radiorevolutionpanafricaine.com/single-post/rape-culture-in-tigray-region-of-ethiopia.

39 See https://x.com/EliasAmare/status/1384487496923246594.

40 See https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/24/ethiopias-leader-must-answer-for-the-high-cost-of-hidden-war-in-tigray, citing EEPA, a notoriously biased Belgian NGO.

contradictory or false evidence.[41] Indeed, people *were* killed – allegedly by Eritrean troops – but they were mostly combatants, not civilians. The JIT 2021 Report (cited above)[42] noted that in fights with the Eritrean Defence Force contingent in the outskirts of Aksum c.100 people were killed – combatants and associated civilians (the Ethiopian government denied involvement in the killings; see JIT 2021, Appendix V, p. 9). The Ethiopian Federal Office of the Attorney General reported that a total of 123 people were killed in the incidents (ibid.: 87). But a "targeted massacre on civilians" of the magnitude reported in the global press could not be confirmed.

– Maryam Dengelat in 2021: this was the place of a church and monastery in Tigray where an alleged targeted massacre by Eritrean troops occurred, with pro-TPLF media reporting that between 37 and 160 civilians had been killed. But no real confirmation of what exactly happened at this isolated site was ever obtained. Global media picked up the story and presented an unverified account. Social media reporting, and especially the CNN story based on it,[43] was analysed critically in a NAI report (NAI 2021: 29-30). Until today no clear confirmation was presented, but the image of a massacre lingers in the global press.

– A most notorious case was what allegedly happened in Humera in 2021, a town in the contested Wolqait area of Ethiopia where many Tigrayans had been evicted during the earlier stage of the war by non-Tigrayan local militias (EHRC 2021: 2-3), and especially after the TPLF-orchestrated massacre on Amharic-speaking inhabitants of the town Mai Kadra in the same region in early November 2020 that is well-documented.[44] In September 2021, problematic reports emerged in social media on an alleged massacre of Tigrayans by unknown, presumably Ethiopian, (militia) forces in Humera (which since November 2020 was under control of the Amhara Region),[45] and a curious allegation was made via

41 See https://jeffpearce.medium.com/ethiopia-lies-damn-lies-axum-and-the-west-242f471c45ae. See also Pearce 2024: 93-96.

42 https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3947207.

43 At https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/26/africa/ethiopia-tigray-dengelat-massacre-intl/index.html.

44 See https://ehrc.org/tigray-maikadra-massacre-of-civilians-is-a-crime-of-atrocity/.

45 See https://twitter.com/search?q=Tigrayan%20bodies%20Humera%20%20setit&src=typed_query&f=top.

CNN[46] that "bodies of Tigrayans [were] found in the Setit (border) river downstream of Humera". A grave accusation, based on unclear local sources, and much amplified. But again, no evidence could stand the test of veracity.[47] It appeared to be a misleading and convoluted story of people (possibly their own combatants) killed in battle and dumped in the river by pro-TPLF forces themselves.[48]

– Interestingly, massacres of Amhara and Afar civilians/non-combatants in TPLF-invaded and occupied areas and as reported by Ethiopian local media (e.g., in Amharic) were at least as serious, but despite the evidence were much less referred to in the global media. Examples were the cases in Humera itself in November 2020;[49] in Ch'enna town (over 200 killed),[50] in Qobo (over 50 killed),[51] and in Gashena in November 2021 (50-60 killed).[52] During the war period, hundreds of Amharic-speaking people were killed in the Oromia Region by an insurgent group (OLA) that had allied itself with the TPLF.[53]

– In the Wolqait/"Western Tigray" area (see above), the disputed territory between Amhara and Tigray Regions,[54] claims of mutual "ethnic cleansing" actions were made by the

46 See: https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/03/africa/ethiopia-tigray-sudan-bodies-intl-afr/index.html and https://twitter.com/WagShumZeRaya/status/1434512673803317251/photo/3 for the photo of the CNN tweet on this.

47 Cp. https://abren.org/when-cnn-faked-the-news-on-ethiopia/ for a critical analysis.

48 A quite plausible dissection of this fake news was given by this analyst: (https://twitter.com/Qnie_Addis/status/1435967588928942080?s=03). Cp. also: https://waltainfo.com/tplf-revives-fake-humera-masaccre-campaign/.

49 See "70 clandestine burial pits found in Humera-reports." Ethiopian Observer 29 Nov. 2020 (https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2020/11/29/70-clandestine-burial-pits-found-in-humera-reports/)

50 Report: https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2021/09/10/tigray-forces-killed-200-civilians-in-village-in-dabat-woreda-residents-and-officials/.

51 Cf. https://borkena.com/2021/09/20/kobo-massacre-rights-group-says-received-reports-of-civilian-massacre-by-tplf/.

52 www.reuters.com/world/africa/government-offensive-pushes-forward-scars-war-dot-ethiopias-amhara-region-2021-12-10/ and: www.ethiopiancitizen.com/2021/12/the-gashena-massacre-yet-another-ugly-scar-on-ethiopias-history.html.

53 One is mentioned on https://borkena.com/2021/10/13/east-wollega-region-massacre-ethiopia-govt-did-not-respond/.

54 See: www.hornafricainsight.org/post/welkait-ethiopia-geo-strategic-importance-and-the-consequential-annexation-by-tplf. See also the comments by a former TPLF leader on the issue: https://twitter.com/RassBariaw/status/1696669314848358610?t=lrbEaVdHYatUBRV_SPy0rw&s=03.

fighting parties, and they have some substance because abuse occurred on both sides. The earlier cited JIT report mentioned that "both Tigrayans and Amharas fled their habitual areas of residence, at different intervals, in substantial numbers, in fear or after witnessing ethnically induced human rights violations" (JIT Report 2021: 53). The issue of Tigrayans persecuted or chased out of Wolqait was amplified in social media time and again.[55] As this Wolqait issue is complicated and needs more in-depth field and digital research, I cannot discuss it here, although the area has once again become embroiled in an armed conflict in the Amhara Region (of which Wolqait was considered a part) started by the federal government in April 2023. A recent field research-based Amharic book reports the painful history of this contested region and shows the extent of human rights abuses and population manipulation since the late 1980 until the 2020-2022 war (Gondar University team 2022). Accompanying this, the status of the territory and its people continues to be the focus of intense (social) media warfare and debate.

Social Media as Negative Discourse

Throughout these examples, one can observe that social media activists produced messages on the conflicts in Ethiopia (notably the one in Tigray, 2020-2022) to create partisan narratives, marked by "motivated reasoning", seeking their own confirmation, and targeting the global news media (which were weakly represented on the ground in Ethiopia). This was evident on the side of the pro-TPLF crowd but to a lesser extent could also be demonstrated for pro-government activists. All this has been conflict-enhancing: their language use was not aimed at balance or dialogue, or "bridging discourse", but confrontational and antagonistic, and often omitted relevant facts. It was fuelled by a fear of "cognitive dissonance", manifested in the neglect or denial of factual material that threatened one's own position – evident in the debate on Ethiopia's conflicts in general. As noted above, Ethiopian diaspora groups, a main source of social media messages and online channels followed in Ethiopia, were happy to oblige. Cooperative communication or constructive argument/engagement was not the prime goal.

55 E.g., https://twitter.com/kidu_gebre/status/1522928955036250112.

While social media messaging is obviously useful for information purposes, critical analysis, and can enhance democratic debate and politics, this presupposes that users have a positive, "trained" or open attitude in dealing with the plethora of material available online so as to make reasonable judgements. This positive aspect may hardly weigh up to negative use: as an "institutional" configuration, social media messaging hardly has the aim to "dialogue". Ultimately, social media can be used/consulted usefully only when source and fact checks are pursued if not embedded in its functioning, and this is obviously not the case here. In situations of intense armed conflicts, such as in Ethiopia, the role of social media as shaping conciliatory public discourse is virtually absent, and therefore its value is limited. Social media messaging, as rooted in identity group-based political "communities", cannot be relied upon as an exclusive source – although many users do so – for any definite statements on conflict situations or political solutions. This was amply shown in the digital and actual warfare in Ethiopia.

Conclusion

The above analysis confirms the hypothesis of Schöne et al. (2021) that social media users favour negative messaging and, in the absence of digital literacy and legal regulation, this may outweigh these media's positive aspects. We should note that social media messaging is not just information, but also *drama* (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017: 7), with an amplification of shared beliefs and ideologies of specific groups, not led by truth conventions. In Ethiopia, X-Twitter "has become an online ideological battlefield."[56] The Tigray War is one case among several where we saw excessively negative and misleading use of social media (and other digital channels) that made the discussion of what really happened, and why and how, opaque and murky. This was of course the intention of the messengers, who placed themselves in an identitarian discourse, being supporters of a specific political and/or ethnic category to which loyalty was maintained in the face of contrary factual information in "counter-tweets" or other media messages. Of course, the instrumentalisation and abuse of social media for aggressive postings and hate speech is a global problem (Howard 2019; Bolter 2019; Haidt 2022), but in the Ethiopian case, it is particularly acute because of divisive ethnic-based politicking, weak monitoring, lack of effective judicial oversight, major disruptive impact of diaspora-based actors, and chaotic and unpredictable national politics. The growing research in Ethiopia on this subject (Tadesse

56 See Ripple Research (2022). This is an interesting, quantitatively-based study of dominant themes and emotional states in Twitter "warfare" in Ethiopia.

and Abebaw 2023; Wubetu and Salau 2022; Endalkachew 2023) seems to confirm the often-negative impact of social media on the country's political rhetoric and political culture.

Study of the Ethiopian case confirms the points made by numerous analysts (Haidt, Harari, Bolter, Bail, and others)[57] that the social media in general can have a persistent baneful influence on public debate and politics, notably in democratic countries allowing freedom of speech. It can be predicted that the current upsurge of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its use for fake messaging and digital imagery will add to the problems (Bender and Hanna 2023), especially as its unscrupulous use is tempting, and regulation of this new digital technology is even worse than that of the "mainstream" social media discussed here.

Cognizant of the fact that digital literacy and standards of online communication are absent or at least weakly moderated, that social media use is highly addictive, and that a business model of profit maximalisation by large tech social media companies is predominant, too much value is attached to social media communication *content*. The majority of the utterances being unreliable, *ad hominem* insulting, misleading, showing massive mis/disinformation and incitement has not prevented social media from becoming a potent force feeding back into the regular political and public arenas (mainstream press, policy institutes, parliaments, government ministries). The mere quantity of (unmoderated) messages, retweets and sharing ("going viral") enhances their ubiquitous online and offline impact. The current global "information ecology" system and digital illiteracy among consumers make this impact disproportionate and very risky.

The above observations would not only support the case for training users (that is, all of us) in digital literacy and critical common sense, but also for responsible legislative-regulatory efforts to rein in subversive effects of social media on society, education and political life – however difficult this may be in the technological and juridical sense. It is unlikely that this will soon happen, either globally or in Ethiopia. The large global players are the Western big tech companies, the Chinese government (TikTok), and smaller but no less active state players in totalitarian countries, such as Russia, Qatar, Turkey, Iran or North Korea. Social media are both a flourishing business model and a powerful state tool. But when they are not called to account and

57 Apart from Haidt, Harari, Bolter, Bail, see Karim et al., 2020; Dumbrava 2021; Bail 2018; Kubin and von Sikorski 2021; and www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/features/how-social-medias-toxic-content-sends-teens-into-a-dangerous-spiral/; www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/10/15/64-of-americans-say-social-media-have-a-mostly-negative-effect-on-the-way-things-are-going-in-the-u-s-today/.

legally restrained, the problem will continue. In Ethiopia, little regulatory activity is expected either – barring the frequent censorship or state control of Internet and telecom services.

As a final note, research and theoretical interpretation of social media messaging in conflict settings might need to: (a) analyse in more detail the nature of, and political-rhetorical strategies used by, the digital forums and popular accounts, as well as their "content moderation" conventions (if any), (b) locate the interests and political aims of the activists – i.e., their political-identitarian basis – and their connections and funding sources/models, and (c) deconstruct the messaging in the light of a critical appraisal of reported facts on the ground in a focused manner, necessitating extensive background research using acceptable evidence and minimising bias and selectivity.

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