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Essay

Online speech and offline violence: Reflections on the current violence in Ethiopia

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Abstract: Drawing on the author's keynote at the Forum Media and Development (fome) in 2021, this article explores some of the assumptions between social media content and offline violence, particularly in Africa, and with special reference to the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia. As with previous studies on radio and violence, much of the current debate about social media has been driven by simplistic models of behaviour that attribute little or no agency to the communities and individuals involved, and minimize the contexts, including the history, in which the violence is occurring. While there are very real concerns about the failure of BigTech to moderate online content particularly in African markets which are peripheral to their profit models, there is an urgent need for a more nuanced approach to understanding the significant variance as to how communities interpret and respond to information they receive from different actors, and on very different mediums, in situations of violent conflict.

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Introduction

In the not-too-distant past, social media was celebrated for its peacemaking and liberating potential (Comminos, 2013; Diamond & Plattner, 2012). It was just a few years ago that Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, while he was in Colombia, lauded the potential for his platform to bring peace. In reference to the decades-long conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebels, he argued that “a lot of conflicts are caused by misunderstandings”, and that “the internet as a whole and social media will bring reconciliation and peace” (Yahoo News, 2015). Building on the euphoria of how some saw social media in the Arab revolution as liberating (Tudoroiu, 2014), such claims of peacebuilding did not seem unreasonable.

A growing number of events have cast doubt on these more positive declarations. The role of social media in mobilizing rioters to storm the US capitol in an attempt to overturn the US elections in early 2021 brought the potential of social media to ferment violence into relief for many in the US and Western Europe. But for some countries in the global south, such concerns have been long held.

Most recently, there have been sharp accusations about social media platforms inflaming and exacerbating (or even instigating) violence in the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia (a point and context that will be returned to throughout this article). But Ethiopia follows on similar concerns in Sri Lanka, for which Facebook has publicly apologized for its role in violence against Muslims in Sri Lanka during riots in 2018. The government of Sri Lanka imposed a state of emergency that included orders to internet and mobile phone providers to block access to Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp out of concern that they were, according to a government spokesman “spreading hate speech and amplifying them” (Goel et al., 2018). The events in Sri Lanka were preceded by the findings of the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission to Myanmar, which argued that social media had a “determining role” in genocide (Human Rights Council, 2018; Miles, 2018). These are just a few of the most prominent cases.

Confidence in the ability of social media companies to address concerns of information disorder online (including hate speech and mis/disinformation)¹ on their platforms appears to be at an all-time low. While data on perceptions of Big Tech in Africa is scant, the data that does exist highlights declining trust being driven by concerns of mis- and disinformation (Wasserman & Morales, 2019).² This contrasts with the US where users have indicated that they are most concerned about the failure of platforms to protect their privacy and data (with just 18% of Facebook users

¹ For further information about what the concept of information disorder attempts to include, see the Council of Europe’s frameworks for research and policy making:

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/information-disorder>

² See, for example, Wasserman and Morales’ study that focuses primarily on the large markets of Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. Data from smaller markets in Africa are very difficult to obtain.

agreeing that the platform does so), followed by concerns of safety and the ability and desire of companies to act in the best interests of users (Williamson, 2022).

This article, which summarizes the keynote I gave at the Forum Media and Development (fome) in 2021,³ explores some crucial concerns around social media in conflict, and particularly in smaller, less profitable markets (and Ethiopia in particular) through three key areas: first, confidence in large social media companies to effectively respond, and address, the challenges conflict situations pose to how they regulate and moderate content on their platforms; second, the ability of those that intervene, or attempt to intervene, in conflicts (whether development actors or academics) to understand both the real and/or potential role of social media in rapidly evolving events; and third, the significant variance and variables as to how communities interpret and respond to information they receive from different actors and on very different mediums in situations of violent conflict.

Big Tech and information disorder in violent conflict

The publishing of the Facebook Files, including the leaks and associated testimony of the former Facebook employee and whistleblower Frances Haugen, offered a series of dramatic revelations about how the company was responding, or failing to respond, to concerns of information disorder in peripheral markets. The war in Ethiopia repeatedly came up in the testimony. It was surprising that the situation was at the fore of her testimony given how peripheral countries like Ethiopia have been to the business interests of large social media companies. But Haugen had strong words arguing that “what we saw in Myanmar and are now seeing in Ethiopia are only the opening chapters of a story so terrifying, no one wants to read the end of it” because Facebook was “literally fanning ethnic violence” (Akinwotu, 2021).

Much of what has been made public in these files is information that was already known, or suspected, although it has often been countered, or denied, by social media companies. But the files have reaffirmed and confirmed the severity of the deep inequalities in terms of how social media content is moderated. We now have more evidence that online hate speech in most countries in the global south is not being adequately monitored or taken down.

Prior to the Haugen testimony, Facebook, for example, had argued that it had proactively removed over 90% of identified hate speech but the leaked records have demonstrated that “as little as 3-5% of hate” speech is removed (Whistleblower Aid, 2021). This number is likely to be even less for countries such as Ethiopia and Somalia. Similarly, it has long been known that social media companies have not invested in human moderation equally – more than 90% of Facebook’s users are outside of North America, but only a small percentage of moderators focus on the global

³ The Forum Media and Development (fome) is a network of German Media assistance organizations. The fome 2021 symposium was dedicated to “TRUST” in media.

south; content moderators spend nearly 90% of their time focused on posts in America and Canada (Tworek 2021). The Facebook Files revealed, for example, that in Ethiopia the company only had language competency for two out of the more than fifty languages spoken (Wall Street Journal, 2021).

Furthermore, machine learning, or Artificial Intelligence (AI), as much as companies are hoping, is unlikely to be the solution to the challenge of content moderation for a long time. Not only does it appear to lack the required sensitivity to complex situations, such as the one in Ethiopia, but Facebook's own internal research indicated their algorithms incorrectly deleted Arabic content more than 70% of the time (Scott, 2021). Given languages such as Amharic, Swahili, or Somali are even less prevalent and are considered low-resource languages, where there is less text and material for AI to be trained on, accurate automated content removal for these languages is further off.

The challenges around online hate speech in Ethiopia, or the global south more broadly, raises important questions about both the willingness, and even the capacity, of these extremely wealthy and profitable companies, the majority of which are situated in the US or China, to address how their companies are performing, and the impacts they may be having, in regions such as Africa. There is a growing awareness among users, policymakers, and governments that trusting large social media companies to get it right or even really prioritize getting it right in countries that are not financial priorities for them is risky. There is emerging consensus that regulation is urgent but the exact reasons why regulation should occur, and the paths to do so are less certain. Current debates are almost entirely centred on large markets, such as whether regulation may have a role in fostering a vibrant digital public sphere in the US (Balkin, 2021). The EU has taken a lead in attempting to regulate social media companies (through the 2022 Digital Services Act), which may have an impact on the practices of social media companies more broadly, including in smaller markets in the global south where countries have little leverage over (often wealthier) Big Tech. In contrast to the era when companies were claiming the potential peacebuilding role for social media, or commentators were lauding their potential to undermine autocratic governments, it is now clear that many of the dominant platforms have been constructed in such a way to amplify division, extremism and polarization with some indications to suggest that it is seriously undermining democratic processes and social cohesion in some societies (Myers, 2022).

In response to Haugen's allegations that content is ineffectively moderated in some of these smaller markets, many of which are in Africa, Facebook has argued that the platform has been addressing these concerns through, in the words of Mark Zuckerberg during his testimony, removing content that "could lead to imminent real-world harm" (Pelley, 2021), and by building "an unprecedented third-party fact checking programme" (Pelley, 2021). While acknowledging that the "system isn't perfect [...] it is the best approach that we have found to address misinformation in line with our country's values" (Pelley, 2021). The fact-checking programme does,

however, at least in theory, have an outside influence in these smaller African-language markets (such as Ethiopia or Tanzania) where content moderation, whether human or automated, is extremely limited.

Ongoing research I am leading on the governance of factchecking programmes⁴, particularly in Africa, shows that their work is very small scale, in some cases they only refute a few pieces of misinformation a month, and they do precisely that – focus on misinformation and disinformation not the takedown of hate speech content. Furthermore, as the majority of these organizations are part of the Facebook third-party factchecking programme, they are limited in their freedom to factcheck political speech. American social media companies have largely tried to absolve themselves of factchecking posts or ads by politicians, arguing that they ought not to be the arbiters of political speech, and “in a democracy, people should be able to see what politicians say” (Rodriguez, 2020). But not all countries, particularly in Africa, are American-styled democracies and increasing research is demonstrating that even in such democracies, politicians are often responsible for sharing or posting untrustworthy material or links (Lewandowski & Lasser, 2022). So, while factchecking organizations can do important work, their reach is limited as is their scope of work, particularly in response to concerns around online speech and offline harms. In many respects they still reflect and remain constrained by the mandate and design of the pre-social media era under which some of the first organizations emerged. In these contexts, they were geared towards fact checking mass media content or political speeches, not the enormous, multi-lingual, and messy online spaces they are now working in.

Media effects in context

While online hate speech and mis/disinformation is a prevalent and significant problem, it is less clear what implications this has on the ground, for conflict affected communities. As we saw in the Haugen leaks, and broader public debate, when it comes to regions affected by violent conflict, there are broad assumptions about the association between online speech and offline violence. This is also feeding into a notion that there is something extreme or particular about social media - that false media messages cause irrational behaviour. Judging from how people and news media speaks of misinformation, the power of media to alter elections, to start wars, it appears we are in a time when social media is all powerful. Much of the contemporary research on social media is focused on methods that rely on the use of big data, social network analysis, and computational propaganda to come up with models or approaches to support arguments about the overwhelming influence of social media

⁴ There has been a rapid growth of third-party factchecking organizations as a front-line mechanism to attempt to address the challenges of online content moderation, particularly in the global south. These tend to be independent organizations that often receive funding from social media companies to review and debunk mis and disinformation on their platforms. An international network of factchecking programmes is governed by the Poynter Institute which sets the standards and norms for member organizations.

on society. But the question is what these types of methods and tools make visible and what they make less visible.

In a forthcoming article, I argue that the empirical evidence around social media, online speech and offline violence, particularly in Africa, remains nascent. Our semi-structured evidence review is based on the UK DFID's guidance on 'assessing the strength of evidence'. In analysing the available research, we included work from a variety of disciplines, from information science, political science, to psychology, reflecting varied methodologies. We focused on the last 10 years and narrowed a database search that initially revealed more than 25,000 texts to just a dozen or so publications that passed through the inclusion criteria.

Almost all the publications included in our scope started from one shared premise: ICTs exert great and increasing influence on African societies, in myriad ways. Oftentimes, the text is situated within the context of the potential benefits ICTs can bring for development: in economic terms and for the financial sector, for education and (female) empowerment purposes, the dissemination of health and other information through public institutions, the improvement of living standards more generally and so forth. Most commonly, communication technologies are ascribed considerable influence in the political context - often positive, although that is changing: in facilitating the dissemination of political information and encouraging democratic participation, but also as catalysts for collective action and civil unrest.

The available literature generally argues that the spread of mobile phone use and internet access are manifesting in violent offline harms. But the mechanism which translates between technology and violence, however, was unclear in the available research. In short, we found very little evidence identifying such a suggested link.

This missing link is not isolated to media scholars but can also be found among those studying conflict. [The Journal of Genocide Research](#) recently published a special section (forum) on "Mass Atrocities and Political Violence in Ethiopia" (2022). The opening article of this forum notes that genocide scholars have largely neglected Ethiopia's histories of atrocious violence (Ibreck & de Waal, 2022), a trend that is changing as addressing the conflict has become a strategic foreign policy priority for some rich countries. What implications might this have on the conflict and possible interventions or responses?

The growing media interest, as well as academic interest in Ethiopia, follows the lines of what was witnessed in Rwanda in 1994 and Darfur in 2003. With this surge of media attention, there is also a risk of distorting or politicizing basic concepts or research questions. Academics, both local and international, can be plagued by the same problems as journalists, human rights activists, or media development organizations. This includes misinterpreting events and, in the struggle to navigate complex ethical, political and economic realities, "propos[e] theories that could only make sense from a distance" (whether the distance is the capital city of Addis Ababa

or London) that inevitably shape international policies or interventions (Ibreck & de Waal, 2022). The special issue went on to highlight, through its collection of articles, Ethiopia's past violence, and episodes, offers crucial ways of thinking about the present, from violence in the peripheries of the state including the persistent discrimination and forceful domination of the ethnic Nuer and Anuak or Anywaa in Gambella, the imperial conquest of the Oromo peoples (a form of colonization), to earlier wars in Tigray (and Eritrea).

Hate speech in contemporary Ethiopia has certainly been pervasive- both online and offline, and from all angles, the diaspora, the government, soldiers and others (see Gagliardone et al., 2016; Gagliardone et al., 2019). In his now notorious speech over a year ago, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed called on Ethiopians to help rid the country of a cancer, to "remove the weed" and in our country, he explained we 'weed collectively' referring to the Tigray(an) People's Liberation Front (TPFL) or Tigrayans in general (Ahmed, 2021). Similarly, an ally of the Prime Minister compared Tigrayan rebels to the devil and said "They should be erased and disappear from historical records and one should find out about them by digging in the ground" (Plaut, 2021). Such talk resonates with his more recent calls for people in Addis to take up arms against the TPLF. Tigrayans have been arrested, with seemingly little discrimination at times, and detained in remote camps. They have had their businesses targeted, and closed, and have been subjected to long-term internet shutdowns.

In Ethiopia, some have been finding echoes of Rwanda. Newspaper headlines have been drawing this comparison - headlines such as "Africa can prevent Ethiopia from going down Rwanda's path" (Kissi, 2021) or "Will Ethiopia's genocide be worse than Rwanda's?" (Rubin, 2021). Hate speech is clearly implicated in these articles. But what are the real implications of drawing the connections between what might be said online and offline violence? How do we avoid the types of assumptions that colleagues warned us about in terms of distorting, politicizing or getting wrong current conflicts? In essence, my third and final point - how can we better understand media effects in very different contexts?

Rather than a path for Ethiopia, Rwanda may be a warning for researchers and those working in the media assistance or media support field, particularly in conflicts. The notorious Radio Milles Collines, which has been widely attributed to mobilizing violence against Tutsis in Rwanda, is held up as the prime example of media leading to mass violence (propaganda has, of course, long been implicated or seen as having a central role in war, particularly WWII) (Baisley, 2014). But Rwanda is significant because it is one of the first times where the so-called international community was supposed to have intervened in the media space, for example, by jamming radio transmitters to silence that station and hate speech (Des Forges, 2002). This lack of action was seen as a missed opportunity to have stemmed the violence and later encouraged a more forceful media intervention during the war in the Balkans (Price, 2000).

Scott Straus, however, more than a decade later, conducted an important study refuting some of the conventional wisdom that broadcasts from the radio were a primary determinant of the genocide (Straus, 2007). He found more conditional media effects which only had significance when situated in the broader context of violence and the broader information and political ecology. He noted, as we did in our above-mentioned evidence review, that there has been little sustained empirical analysis of radio media effects in conflict, and in the Rwandan genocide. Much of the writing has asserted or implied undifferentiated, direct, and massive media effects in a way that is at odds with what we know about political communications. Through dozens of interviews with individuals involved in violence, as well as through tracking radio broadcasts and outbreaks of violence, Straus argues that radio alone cannot account for either the onset of most genocidal violence or the participation of most perpetrators. He did, however, find some evidence that radio catalysed a small number of individuals and incidents of violence, had an impact on framing choices and alternatives to the public, and reinforced messages that many individuals received through other means (Straus, 2007). As with the current research on social media and violence, much of the research on mass media, or radio and violence in Africa, has been driven by simplistic models of behaviour that attribute little or no agency to the communities or individuals involved and marginalize the contexts, including the history, in which extreme violence took place. It also appears to overlook the extent to which communities may have had long-time exposure to hate speech and incitement to violence, and have developed savvy and sophisticated mechanisms and ways of interpreting and reading the messages coming from these outlets. Somalia, for example, is one such case where warlord radios and television has very much been part of the conflict for the last 30 years (Stremlau et al., 2016).

Overlooking audience agency

One of the challenges for interpreting the connection between social media and violence is identifying and understanding this shifting context of information and trust which varies significantly not only between countries but also within different communities.

When reflecting on contemporary events in Ethiopia it can be helpful to refer back to Ethiopia's notorious 2005 elections. These elections were significant for the unprecedented freedoms around political campaigning, the liberalization of media, and the competitiveness of the voting process. Social media did not have as significant of a role as it does now, but radio and television were seen as unusually influential for some communities during the campaigning and election period. The ruling party opened the state media to include quotas of airtime to all political parties, along with coverage of opposition rallies, interviews and manifestos (Stremlau, 2018). The opposition party took the ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) by surprise by making unprecedented electoral

gains. Mass arrests, election-related violence, and the closure of many media outlets followed.

The impact of providing opposition groups with increased access to the media was more significant than predicted, particularly in rural areas. While residents in urban areas were long accustomed to a vibrant press, the airing of opposition views and political debates on radio in rural communities challenged some of the expectations and perceptions held within Ethiopia's long-established hierarchical political culture. It was not so much the content or substance of the debates that affected how people voted but the fact that, people now perceived the government to be 'so weak that it must sit with its enemies' (Lefort, 2007, p. 265). To rural audiences, many of whom were subsistence farmers, the government had not only allowed itself to be openly criticised and mocked on national radio but there appeared to be little repercussion for those that were challenging the incumbent authorities. This was seen to be a signal that the government was weak and unlikely to retain power. It was assumed by many that a future political entity would soon take over that would require their allegiance and support (Lefort, 2007). In short, these communities did not want to be on the wrong side of the victors.

Earlier, I referred to the situation in the neighbouring (and overlapping) Somali territories (overlapping because Somalis are the majority in the Eastern Ogaden region of Ethiopia). Somalia is often described as among the world's worst failed states, but across the region an expansive and competitive media system exists. Somalia also has some of the lowest data prices on the continent and less than neighbouring Kenya, which is often referred to as Africa's Silicon Savannah (Onyango, 2022). And with this has been vibrant online participation, including an abundance of online hate speech. There is little indication to suggest that social media companies have robust or significant systems to monitor content in Somali leaving much of both the mass media and online media spaces where hate speech and disinformation has spread with few impediments from companies themselves. In such a context, media consumers quickly develop sophisticated and nuanced understandings of media ownership, regulation, and underlying motivations behind certain outlets or information sources. This also raises very important questions that contrast with what Lefort described in Ethiopia - for a region subjected to longstanding violence, where media has been an integral part of it, with warlords establishing radios and media being woven into the fabric of the conflict, how does one interpret or understand online hate speech or incitement to violence? Not only is it very difficult to draw a direct line between hate speech, or any speech, and offline violence, but it is also challenging to generalize about such media effects across very different political, economic, and cultural settings where communities have had varying engagement with different forms of media. This has long been true for radio or television and continues to be relevant for social media.

Conclusion

As this article goes to press, Meta is being sued for 2 billion USD over violence in Ethiopia. The case, which is being filed in Kenya where Meta has a content moderation office, argues that hundreds of thousands of people have died in the conflict while others have been pushed into destitution, as a result of the company's failure to effectively moderate hateful and inciting content, and in many cases Facebook's algorithm actually promotes such content as it attracts more engagement (Vallance, 2022). While this is not the first time Meta faces a lawsuit for its alleged role in violence - in December 2021 Rohingya refugees launched a lawsuit for reparations for violence in Myanmar estimated at 150 billion USD - it comes at a time when Big Tech is under increasing scrutiny for its unequal application of content moderation policies and its failure to develop technology and systems that can address concerns of information disorder in diverse contexts (and languages). Lawsuits such as these represent a move to enforce great accountability and responsibility of social media platforms beyond the rich markets companies tend to focus on. However, as argued in this article, the causality between online speech and offline violence is complex and not always as direct as some would like to assume suggesting that there is much to learn from long-standing and nuanced debates around media effects and violent conflict.

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