

The Quest for
**PRESS
FREEDOM**



*One Hundred Years of History
of the Media in Ethiopia*

MESERET CHEKOL RETA

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To Woizero Alem-Seghed Heruy, who saw my potential when I was not even aware of it, and brought me into the fascinating world of journalism.

Preface

Despite the fact that modern mass media in Ethiopia is more than one hundred years old, there has not been a single comprehensive volume on the history of such an important institution. Information is limited to sporadic articles on a particular media organization in a specific time period. Even then, the number of such articles constitutes a handful. I thought that a volume detailing the history of this crucial public institution from its inception to its current status would provide a complete picture of its long journey. In addition, the contribution of many toward its progress as well as its reverse course should be told. Equally important, it is now time for the government to facilitate the reinvention of the mass media in a way that could truly serve the Ethiopian people.

Another purpose of writing this book is to help schools of journalism in universities across the country meet their textbook needs. As prospective journalists, students need to acquire a solid knowledge of the history of Ethiopian media. Therefore, this book could serve either as a textbook or a required reading for a course on the subject.

This is a study on the news media in Ethiopia, hence limiting itself to newspapers, magazines, radio, television, news agencies as well as media policymakers. Therefore books, literary journals, films, plays, etc. are outside the scope of this project.

Secondly, this book is concerned with Ethiopian news organizations operating within the borders of the country. Thus the study of clandestine media operations by opposition political forces outside the country and the activities of foreign correspondents inside Ethiopia are beyond the scope of this study. Furthermore, it does not address the operation of foreign radio stations broadcasting in Ethiopian languages and targeting the Ethiopian population. I believe that each of these needs to be treated in a separate work.

Now, in the course of conducting research for this book, I have witnessed a very tight control of information by the government, when it comes to public documents on the current state of the media. I have seen an unprecedented level of fear among media professionals to allow me access to such documents. Even senior officials dragged their feet to respond to my request, regardless of my assurance to them that the documents will solely be used for academic purposes. Ironically, this happens in spite of a press law that ensures free access to public information. Notwithstanding such impediments, I have been able to obtain sufficient data from other sources to complete this volume. It is my hope that you will find this book of significant value as you read through its different sections.

Food for thought: In this book, I have provided both the Ethiopian and European calendars wherever necessary. In my research, I have come to realize that this calendar difference is one source of errors made by various writers. Therefore I would like to recommend that we keep the Ethiopian calendar for documentation or other use pertaining to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and use the European calendar for official and everyday purposes. I know many fiercely disagree with such an idea. But I believe this is the practical way of tackling the problem. The Jews, the Russians and others have long adopted a similar system. It's time that we do something about it.

Finally, I will do my level best to have this book translated into Amharic for the benefit of a larger segment of the Ethiopian population. I believe that any book written on an Ethiopian subject in a foreign language should be translated into the national language of Ethiopia so that it may serve a wider public. It is with this conviction that I will make a relentless effort toward the translation of this work and the next volume into Amharic. Meanwhile, I hope you will enjoy reading the English edition.

Meseret Chekol Reta, Ph.D.
March 2, 2012

Acknowledgments

One of the difficult tasks in a massive project like this is to exhaustively list all those who contributed to its success, but I will try.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my wife Beleyou Belay for her unrelenting support throughout the preparation of this book. I also wish to express my deep gratitude to Minnesota State Services for the Blind for providing the lion's share of funds needed for this project. Special thanks go to Angela Kraninger, Nancy Madich, Mike Newman, and Lindsey Hanson for their positive roles in approving the funds.

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Prof. Richard Pankhurst was kind enough to allow me to reproduce photos of his mother as well as clarify certain cases involving her. At this point, I would like to thank all others who granted me permission to reproduce the

photos of their relatives: Shimeles Yelma Heruy, Meskerem Girma, Amha MerséHazen, and Tigist Amde Mikael.

Needless to say, I am indebted to all my sources who shared with me a great wealth of knowledge about the history of my native country's media. Veteran journalist Mulugeta Lulé comes first in this category. I call him "The Walking Encyclopedia" for his vast knowledge on the media and other areas of Ethiopian history, and he has shared it with me generously. I would like to take this opportunity to urge him once again to write all that he knows for the benefit of current and successive generations; our people will truly benefit from a book that he will publish on this and other historical subjects.

Ambassador Ahadu Saburé is another source whom I wish to thank for his great help. I am truly impressed by his vivid and detailed memories even at this age in his late eighties.

Ato Negash Gebre Mariam, Merid Beqele, Teklu Tabor, Nebiyu Eyassu, Kefale Mamo, Tadesse Zinnayé, Agaredach Jemaneh, Maregu Bezabeh, Atnaf-Seghed Yelma, Assefa Gebre Mariam Tessema, Seyfu Seyoum, Woldu Yemessel, Bizu Wondimagegnehu, Major Girma Yelma, as well as the late Mezgebu Abate, Mamo Woudneh and Amsalegenet Yimer are other valuable sources that have added richness to this book.

I would like to thank all those journalists, heads of units, and librarians at the different government media organizations in Addis Ababa who were of tremendous help to me while conducting my field research in 2004. I am equally indebted to the dedicated employees of the Ethiopian Studies Department at the National Library and Archives. Similarly, I wish to extend my gratitude to Berhanu Kassa and Solomon Desalegn at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies. Of course, I cannot forget Tesfayé Haile Mariam, my wonderful research assistant in Addis Ababa, who deserves special thanks.

Here at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls where I teach, my sincere gratitude goes to our librarian Ann Welniak. She has been an amazing resource, ordering books and microfilmed newspapers for me through the inter-library loan system. I am equally indebted to Hanibal Goitom at the Library of Congress for providing most of the legal documents pertaining to Ethiopian media that I needed.

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There might be others whom I forgot to mention here, but I still thank them all for their help, big or small.

Abbreviations

- AEUP: All-Ethiopian Unity Party
AFP: *Agence France Presse*
AM: Amplitude Modulation
ANDM: Amhara National Democratic Movement
AP: Associated Press
BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation
BPR: business process re-engineering
BS: *Berhanena Selam* (used only in this book)
COPWE: Commission for Organizing Party of Workers of Ethiopia
CBC: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
CNN: Cable News Network
CUD: Coalition for Unity and Democracy
EADA: Ethiopian Advertising and Distribution Agency
EBA: Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority
EBC: Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation
E.C.: Ethiopian Calendar
EDP: Ethiopian Democratic Party; often referred to as EDP-Medhin in recognition of its merger with Medhin Party.
EHRCO: Ethiopian Human Rights Council (the “o” in the acronym added, apparently for easier pronunciation)
EJA: Ethiopian Journalists Association
ENA: Ethiopian News Agency
ENJU: Ethiopian National Journalists Union; formally called National Journalists Union of Ethiopia.
EPA: Ethiopian Press Agency

- EPDM: Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement, one of the coalition parties that made up EPRDF. Later, its name was changed to Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM).
- EPLF: Eritrean People's Liberation Front
- EPRDF: Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
- ERTA: Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency
- ESAT: Ethiopian Satellite Television
- ETV: Ethiopian Television
- EWf: Ethiopian World Federation
- FBC: Fana Broadcasting Corporate
- FDRE: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
- FM: Frequency Modulation
- GCAO: Government Communication Affairs Office
- IBTE: Imperial Board of Telecommunication of Ethiopia
- ICRC: International Committee of the Red Cross
- IFJ: International Federation of Journalists
- KW: kilowatt
- MW: medium wave
- NEB: National Election Board
- OAU: Organization of African Unity
- OFDM: Oromo Federal Democratic Movement
- OLF: Oromo Liberation Front
- OPDO: Oromo People's Democratic Organization
- PDRE: People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
- RVOG: Radio Voice of the Gospel
- SABC: South African Broadcasting Corporation
- SEPDM: Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Movement
- SNNPR: Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region
- SW: Short wave
- TGE: Transitional Government of Ethiopia
- TPLF: Tigray People's Liberation Front
- UDHR: Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- UEDF: United Ethiopian Democratic Front
- UN: United Nations
- UN-ECA: United Nations Economic Commission for Africa; also shortened as ECA.
- UPI: United Press International
- VOA: Voice of America
- VOE: Voice of Ethiopia
- VORE: Voice of Revolutionary Ethiopia
- WIC: Walta Information Center
- WPE: Workers' Party of Ethiopia

General Introduction

This is a book about media development and freedom in Ethiopia. More specifically, it examines the creation and building of a modern media institution in the country and the restrictions against its freedoms within the last one hundred-plus years of its existence. The significance of this work lies in its originality and the fact that it addresses these two issues across three distinct epochs: the monarchy era from the early 1900's until 1974, the Marxist military regime from 1974 to 1991, and the ethnic federalist regime from 1991 up to the present.

Governments in each of these historical periods included a provision in their constitution guaranteeing freedom of the press, though with varying degrees. Enshrining such a sacred provision alone does not ensure this fundamental right of citizens; implementing it only can, and that's what is still missing.

The study of the state of press freedom in Ethiopia is paramount in the light of the fact that the nation in all three historical periods has been a signatory of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 of this charter declares: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." This book attempts to show the country's challenges and struggles to honor this covenant.

The author grounds the discussions in this book on the thesis that media development and freedom of the press do not necessarily go hand in hand, and therefore expansion of media infrastructure alone has little impact on freedom of the press. Thus it is important to study the political and social contexts within which the media operate in order to understand the status of press freedom in a given historical period. In the case of Ethiopia, this means

examining how political, economic and social factors influenced the conditions under which the media were operating in each of the three political periods cited earlier.

At the same time the author maintains the position that state ownership of media is prone to abuse of power, and therefore government's role should be limited to dispensing taxpayers' money to publicly-owned media outlets. Ultimately, though, it is the empowerment of democratic institutions through the rule of law that makes press freedom in Ethiopia a reality. Put simply, what matters is not so much whether media organizations are owned publicly or privately, but whether democracy is authentically implemented or not. Indeed, there are government-funded media organizations in Western democracies that enjoy as much freedom in their reporting as their private counterparts, simply because the constitutional provision guaranteeing freedom of expression equally applies to them. The BBC, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), and the media in Scandinavian countries are good examples. Conversely, there are privately-run media outlets in some authoritarian or pseudo-democratic countries that just tow the government's line either out of fear or with a motive to gain favor in the eyes of the rulers. This we have seen in Ethiopia itself where some private newspapers today are staunchly pro-government for the sake of pleasing the leadership.

A second theme reiterated across this book is that most journalists of government media in Ethiopia have a strong desire to exercise their constitutional right to freedom of the press and they have always longed for this privilege. Just because journalists work for government media, it does not mean they have no such desire. Of course, there were and are a few who are, in the right sense of the word, government journalists—reporters or editors who defend the government and nothing else. Such journalists may more accurately be referred to as public relations agents of the government. Otherwise, most journalists working for the state media in Ethiopia have a strong desire to report or express their opinions freely. The author attests to this reality based on his own experience as a radio journalist in the days of the military regime.

Realistically speaking, freedom to privately own and operate media outlets is the first step toward a lasting freedom of the press. The validity of this view can be seen in the fact that nations which spend huge resources on the development of state-run media at best allow a small group of private media outlets designed to give the government a face of democracy. Often, nations with the least degree of freedom of expression also deny their citizens the right to own media organizations. Marketplace of ideas thrives when media are owned and operated by as many diverse groups and individuals as possible. For we know that freedom of expression does not constitute only the right of individuals to

hold the opinion of their choice, but also to seek, receive and impart to others the information they choose.

Some scholars restrict the term "press" to the print media, and therefore prefer using the term "media" with a mind to being inclusive. While this is understandable and even desirable, the author has chosen to use the two terms interchangeably throughout this book to refer to the media as a whole. The reason for this is that the term "press" is still used by many to refer to both print and electronic media, particularly when discussing their watchdog role.

Writing the history of Ethiopian media would be meaningless, as noted earlier, without providing the context within which they were operating in a given period. Therefore a discussion of each historical epoch starts with an overview of the political, economic and social contexts in which the media were operating in the given period. Within this framework, the book chronicles the history of modern mass media in each period from the angles of infrastructural development and press freedom. Yet, it is not a mere account of facts about the media across different periods. It also attempts to present an analysis of the conditions under which the media were operating during that time.

Further, it attempts to explain the established role of the press in Ethiopia. In the United States, the function of the press has historical roots. The colonies were tired of English tyranny. When they won their independence and founded the United States, they saw to it that the primary role of the press be to serve as a watchdog on government. The colonies were suspicious of a strong central government, fearing that it might grow into a "big brother." This traditional role of the American press is intact to date.

In the Ethiopian context, where the press had its beginnings as the gift of the monarch to his subjects, its primary role was praising the monarch and his policies of modernization. In other words, there was no inherent suspicion or fear against government. Therefore when we speak of the function of the press in Ethiopia, its watchdog role for the most part focused on internal and external threats against the unity of the country. The notion of watchdog against government is quite a new phenomenon that has not yet gained firm ground in the state media. However, there have been encouraging signs along this line by the independent press over the last twenty years, despite a severe crackdown by the government. At any rate, one can say that the function of the press in Ethiopia during the last hundred-plus years has had a dual role: portraying the government and/or its leaders as good stewards of national development and mobilizing the people against internal and external threats of the unity of the country.

The developmental role of mass media in a country like Ethiopia is often criticized by Western scholars, arguing that it makes the press too closely

involved, hence biased. The author begs to defer on this: there is no harm in informing people about the development needs and activities of their country. The problem lies in the abuse of this practice. Governments often hijack such an objective to present themselves in a favorable light, denying the journalist the means to delve into the discrepancies of development policies and specific projects. This position on the role of the press is reflected throughout this book.

It also looks into whether the media have been given relative editorial independence or whether they, like the courts, have turned into agencies having no life of their own and their journalists lacking the inner drive to do their job, hence acting no more than government employees.

Further, the book examines how much of the traditional function of mass communication is reflected in the operation of the modern mass media.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book is divided into four main sections. Part 1 deals with the pre-Occupation and Occupation periods of the monarchy era, starting from the reign of Emperor Menelik II in the early 1900's until the end of the Italian invasion in 1941.

Part 2 devotes itself to the post-Occupation period of the monarchy era, which culminates in the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie I by the military in 1974. In this section, the three types of media—print, broadcast, and news agency—are examined separately in addition to the legal and administrative controls over the press. The months leading up to the ouster of the emperor are also discussed in relation to press coverage.

Part 3 dwells on the communist military regime from 1974 to 1991. All the same, it examines the three types of media from various angles, including censorship.

Part 4 looks into the state media under EPRDF since 1991. It particularly examines infrastructural development as well as editorial and legal issues.

Then in the final chapter the author tries to synthesize his discussions from all three historical periods and offer recommendations for a more viable media system in Ethiopia.

This volume is limited to state-owned and party-run media. A subsequent volume under a different title will devote itself to the private media, largely belonging to the present historical period.

In this book, effort has been made to include a sample of the most important newspapers, especially the front pages of their inaugural issues, just to give the reader a good sense of what they looked like. For the benefit of

non-Ethiopian readers, a quick translation of their contents has been provided in English.

Attempt has also been made to acquaint the reader with some of the best-known journalists in different historical periods by presenting their short biographies under the title "Media Personalities."

Finally, in the course of preparing this volume, the author found the accounts of the pre-Occupation period in particular fragmented and at times conflicting. This is understandable as this was not a period where documentation was given much attention. Therefore effort has been exerted to set the record straight by showing which of the competing accounts would be more acceptable.

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