



**New Media: The Press Freedom Dimension
Challenges and Opportunities of New Media for Press Freedom
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Introduction

Somalia, one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world, is located in the eastern corner of the Horn of Africa. It gained its independence in 1960, known to many as the year of Africa due to many countries in the continent gaining independence from the colonial European powers.

The media, the traditional or old media, first emerged in Somalia during the colonial era after the British government which colonized northern party of Somalia established the first radio station in 1948 in Hargeisa, which was called Radio Hargeisa, while the Italian government that colonized southern party of Somalia subsequently founded Radio Mogadishu in 1952.

The two radio stations released programs in English and Italian languages with a small portion of the program translated into Somali language and aimed to implement the colonial interests, spread their political objectives and put on a display of modern civilization and cultures. That time, there were also very few papers published in Arabic, English and Italian languages.

However, such a kind of media was under the control of the colonial administrations and transmitted information relating to their concerns in order to put pressure on the widespread struggle of the Somali people against the continuation of colonial rule. But the two parties of Somalia gained their independences from British and Italian colonies, and then unified. The two radio stations were handed over to the ministry of information of the first civilian government of Somali republic.

Unfortunately, the media did not develop in the nine years of the civilian rule due to financial barriers and weak knowledge of media activities. The Somali citizens were mostly illiterate and the script of Somali language was not developed. People were freedom-oriented and were unable to think of developments in other sectors in the life.

But the situation changed once after the overthrow of the civilian government by the military forces, and announced that Mohammed Siad Barre is the president of Somali republic. Everything was under the control of the military government, including the media. The establishment of any kind of independently or privately owned media was banned. This repression and media dominations lasted 21 years.

Nevertheless, the fall down of the tyrannical government of Siad Barre led the appearance of the first independent newspaper. Although, the ownership of the broadcast media industry in the 1990s was dominated by warlords, comparatively independent electronic media emerged late 90s and early 2000. More than six independent newspapers, nearly twenty private radio stations and three independent televisions are currently operating in Somalia. The online media also came out strongly.

The Somalis in Diaspora launched various websites. Almost 200 Somali websites are currently available. But most of these websites envision defending the interest of specific clan or sub-clan instead of serving for the public. Some of them have clan or sub-clan names or the name of specific clan's district or region of habitation. Such websites are used to broaden the misinformation of a clan or sub-clan in support of the owned clan's political interests.

Around 34 websites are privately owned news-oriented sites and have considerable audiences. These sites are mostly hosted and administered in Europe, USA, Canada, and Asia. Tenth of thousands of Somalis gain access to these websites daily. The work of this new media is significantly benefited by Somali nationals living in the Diaspora as well as people in the country. Growing number of citizens in the country are increasingly logging on these websites on a daily basis. This increase was encouraged by competing internet service providers and existing reasonable prices according to local living standard.

Furthermore in Mogadishu wireless telecommunication for Internet was established in Mogadishu three years before. The provider of this service, Wireless African Broadband Telecommunication (WABTEL), supplies high speed internet, and attracted large number of Somalis in many districts and regions of the country.

Dilemmas Facing the New Media

The prolonged clan-based hostilities severely ravaged the Horn of Africa nation and hence, endangered the life of the ordinary citizens together with media people. Hardhearted attacks on the press and continuing impunity against all kinds of the media reveal discouraging image. Though, each media industry has its own special difficulties, the new media encountered quite a lot of exceptional aggressions. The violence against the new media and its practitioners are carried out by individuals who recognized:

- The mounting influence of the online media to the Somali societies.
- The ever-increasing exploitation of the internet by the Somalis in the five continents of the world.
- Accessible archives on the Web for long period.
- The rising connection of the international community to the Somali websites to get more and fresh information on the Somalia's current affairs.
- The internet as an instrument mobilizing supporters of particular clans to provide financial and material support.
- The internet as a tool educating the populace.

Some of the top figures of Somalia's political authorities discount the new media and try to challenge its work, name and importance. For example, one of the ex-warlords but now in the transitional government calls the internet media the "forum of hearsay". The violations are mainly against workers of the internet media because the websites are hosted outside Somalia. Internet journalists are incessantly abused as many politicians hired individuals monitoring for them anything published on the web that affects their politics or their personality. Rights of online journalists are not only infringed because of what they write but also whatsoever that is published on the website that they work for, which annoys the politicians. Some politicians declared that the internet media can hardly be suppressed as it is mostly based in a foreign country.

Online journalists always have problems of their payments and costs incurred while carrying out an assignment for the website. Despite the insufficient salary, some of the online journalists do not get regular payment and feel difficult about ways to contact with their webmasters or web administrators when claiming their salary. Some journalists were not paid months. Inadequately and occasionally paying online media workers made the internet journalists open to corruption, fear and dishonestness.

Practicing professionalism and ethical standards are very limited as online media executives are not encouraging. The media associations, NGOs and international media development organizations largely concentrate on building the capacity of media professionals in other industries such as print and electronic media. Therefore, if the new media is to thrive and to keep up its animated role of informing the populace the news and current affairs immediately, accurately,

fairly and fearlessly, special media development programmes will be designed to build the capacity of the media professionals of the online media, particularly those in the countries of conflict or in transition.

Recommendations

Acknowledging the weight of the new media and the impediments facing it, quick actions are necessary to boost up the capacity of the new media, and the following proposals merit consideration:

1. Establishing training needs of internet journalists.
2. Organizing special media training and education programmes for internet journalists and online media executives to enhance the quality of the internet media.
3. Building the technical capacity of the Somali online media to practice internationally accepted standards of the set of rules of the internet.
4. Raising the public knowledge of the internet media and its use for public interest instead of clan interest.
5. Sensitizing the politicians about the importance of the new media and the system it works.
6. Assisting the print and electronic media to harness ICTs.
7. Building the capacity of media organizations to know and promote the work of the online media. s