

The Powers and Limits of New Media Appropriation in Authoritarian Contexts: A Comparative Case Study of Oromo Protests in Ethiopia

by

Habtamu Dugo, MS, MA
hab.dugo@gmail.com
Visiting Assistant Professor
University of the District of Columbia

Abstract

Using a comparative case study approach, this paper aims to analyze and synthesize social media appropriation by pro-democracy social movements in multiple countries. While the study primarily focuses on new media appropriation in Oromia and Ethiopia during Oromo Protests from 2014-2017, it also critically examines multiple comparative cases where new media and social media technologies have had significant impact and where they did not have significant impact as desired. The study finds that in authoritarian contexts where traditional mass media are controlled by the state/ruling elites, new media unequivocally serve as strong alternative platforms for the expression of grievances of protesters seeking regime changes. Thus, the paper argues that despite the challenges of restrictions imposed on new media usage, spreading information and coordinating protests across the country's largest state using these tools for the very first time by itself is a significant development in a country nobody predicted new/social media would be used to the extent it had been to rattle the regime to its core. And second, it suggests that protesters put the limited new media resources available to them to a phenomenal use even compared to countries where resources exist in abundance.

Key Words: new media technologies, social media, Internet freedom, political protests, Oromo Protests, social movements, Ethiopia, Oromia, Africa, Oromo, Horn of Africa

Introduction

This paper analyzes and synthesizes new media and social media appropriation by Oromo protest movements in Oromia and Ethiopia from 2014-2017. It then compares the impact of widespread practices of the use of new media technologies in Oromia to other globally successful and unsuccessful cases in order to explain the reasons for success and failure. The paper attempted to answer these two inter-related research questions: 1) Where did new media technologies work effectively to bring about regime changes and why? 2) Where did new media technologies fail to have a larger impact to unseat incumbent regimes and why? The paper presents some of the key restrictions implemented by the Ethiopian government in order to counter the use of new media tools. For the purpose of clarity, a highlight of the issues raised by protesters will be briefly mentioned. Although multiple political organizations have directly or indirectly claimed responsibility for organizing one of most sustainable and longest-running rallies in the empire's history, this paper posits that political organizations failed to consolidate horizontal mass uprisings into a force that would achieve the desired goals of the protests. Protesters used new media technologies and tools such as ZTE smartphones, Facebook, Viber, WhatsApp, websites, blogs and Twitter to share files, photos, audios, videos and texts about crackdown on civilians by police and the military. The trend went on until the regime switched off the internet and banned or restricted the use of social media tools and mobile data.

Contextual Background

Who were the protesters, and what were they protesting about?

Before it culminated into Oromia-wide mass protests, and promoted on social media as “Oromo Protests,” university and school students started small-scale protests following the announcement of the Addis Ababa Master Plan, which sought to annex large territories from surrounding Oromia cities and rural areas into Finfinnee/Addis in order to expand the size of the capital city to double its current size. The plan is explicit about the regime's intentions to incorporate over 6 Oromia's cities and 8 rural *Aanaalee* (Counties) in the vicinity of Finfinnee into Finfinnee against the will of the Oromo people. Sululta, Bishoftu, Sabata Dukem, Holeta and Ambo are among Oromia state's cities planned to be gobbled up by Addis Ababa. Regime authorities estimated that Finfinnee, which currently sits on 54,000 hectares of Oromo land obtained through 19th and 20th century crimes of genocide, now wants to gain 1.1 million¹ hectares of land from Oromia by the same criminal method—genocide. The plan began being implemented before its official announcement and it did already displace at least 150,000 Oromo farmers in Oromia's counties and districts adjacent to the nation's capital.² At the end of its implementation, the plan was projected to displace 8-10 million residents of Oromia's counties and cities.³

The most salient issue raised by protesters from April 2014 to November 2015 was opposition to the master plan and demands for its withdrawal or cancellation. Other less salient issues the protesters raised included demanding self-determination or autonomy for Oromia state. Also, language rights, cultural rights and issues of ethnic-based discrimination against the Oromo people were among the early demands of the protesters.

Beginning in late April 2014 with the Ambo Massacre,⁴ protesters reported the crackdown by security forces using cell phones, leaking disturbing audio-visual information to diaspora-based activists and media organizations. In the absence of international media from the scenes of state-led mass killing, at times, protesters were also citizen reporters of events unfolding against them. Holding up a cell phone in the sight of heavily armed military shooting at civilians posed greater risks to those who did it, but they did put the cause above themselves and continued to spread information on social media.

As the protests reached a critical mass and engulfed the whole Oromo nation and its neighbors from November 2015 to October 2016, the images shared on social media/new media attested to the widespread atrocities that were being committed against civilians across Oromia. Human Rights Watch led the way with early reports on the widespread crackdown.⁵ Then based on human rights reports, very few Western print/online-based media organizations ran the initial stories. The version of the story told by the Western press was highly sanitized compared to the degree of the violence against civilians, but yet that was very welcome by Oromo people at home and diaspora who have been very desperate to get the messages out to the world. The sanitization involved stripping the ethnic identity of the persecuted to make the disturbing events palatable to the perpetrator regime as well as its international backers.

Hashtags, such as #OromoProtests, named by BBC one of 'Africa's top hashtags of 2016'⁶, were used to spread the news of the protests and the concurrent massive atrocities in the hands of the regime. As the continuation of decades of Oromo resistance against Abyssinian tyranny and abuse, the protests reached a critical mass in late 2015 to mid-2016, but the mainstream international media reporting of the protests reached a global critical mass when Rio2016 Olympic men's marathon silver medalist Feyisa Lilesa displayed the protest gesture of Oromo protesters by crossing his wrists above his head making the famous X-sign in order to protest and highlight the killings and other forms of rights abuses perpetrated against his relatives and the Oromo people at large in the homeland.⁷ Feyisa Lilesa's Rio de Janeiro live gesture at the finish line of the international marathon was a premediated heroic act meant to attract the attention of the world toward the massive atrocity crimes the Oromo have been facing in Ethiopia. Judging by standards of hundreds of international media coverage, one determined athlete, Feyisa Lilesa, succeeded in being the first Oromo athlete to bring global publicity of unprecedented magnitude to atrocities as well as to some of the issues raised by the protesters. The global Oromo community widely celebrated this singular act of courage.⁸

Of course, Feyisa was not the only one who sought an end to the killings of the Oromo people. Millions who protested across Oromia also had similar messages. He was different because he amplified the voices of the people by displaying the ultimate symbol of the movement on the global stage by leaps and bounds.

Ethiopian government propagandists and backers often try to minimize the reasons the Oromo people have been protesting to minor, but important rights such as cultural rights, the right to making Afaan Oromoo an official language of Ethiopia, and employment opportunities. One who scoured the Internet, Facebook, Youtube at the time of the protests and listened to the slogans chanted by the protesters, would immediately realize that the Oromo people were making the following major demands: right to self-rule for Oromia, rights over Finfinne, democracy, justice, freedom, land rights, end of Tigrean military occupation, freedom of speech and assembly.

At the onset of the first phase of the protests against the master plan in mid-2014, Addis Ababa University students raised the following issues and uploaded them to YouTube⁹:

Where is democracy? Where is federalism, Finfinne is the heart of Oromia, Sabata is ours, Waliso is ours, Burayu is ours, Holeta is ours, Oromia belongs to Oromos, where can we go? We were born on Oromia, we learned about ourselves on Oromia, we reproduced on it—where can we go? Where can we go? Where can we go? ...We need respect, we need our land, we need protection. Stop killing students, our right should be respected, our freedom should be restored, stop killing students, we need justice, we need true democracy, justice for Oromo students, justice for Oromo farmers, Oromo is not inferior, stop murdering, stop killing, land to our fathers, land for our farmers, the master plan is not for Oromo society.

Early on as well as much later after the demonstrations expanded in scope, the issues raised by Oromo students and Oromo people were similar from one locality of Oromia to another. They demanded the restoration of “Abbaa-biyyummaa,” the ownership of Oromia to Oromia stressing that Oromia belonged to Oromos. These messages were shared on digital media platforms and inspired more people to participate in the uprisings. These were the narratives originating from the protesters. International media coverage often downgraded the issues by ignoring the core reasons they were protesting.

New Media Landscape During Oromo Protests

Despite living in a country with one of Africa's lowest Internet penetration, lowest smartphone penetration rates and a choking state monopoly of telecommunications, Oromo protesters were modestly successful at using social media to horizontally organize, mobilize and share information on crackdown on civilians by Ethiopia security forces.¹⁰ Because of the telecom monopoly it enjoys the authoritarian Ethiopian state disrupted the Internet and mobile phone services at whim in locations where it deemed protests were gathering momentum. When Oromo mass protests and street actions reached their peak in late 2015 to mid-2016, the regime escalated disruption from selective disruption in protest hotspots to a blanket disruption of the Internet, mobile data and voice services as well as popular social media and file-sharing applications such as Viber, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, among others.¹¹ Ethiopian authorities are notorious for disrupting or banning access to the Internet, social media, social media applications and mobile networks without providing any reasons or by justifying the acts as measures "intended" to prevent "exam leaks".¹²

According to *The Economist*, "...the absence of competition has seen a country of more than 80m lag badly behind the rest of the continent...." *The Economist* further paints a grim outlook of Ethiopia's low mobile network penetration in comparison to neighboring African countries, "Mobile-phone penetration, which averages 70% of the population elsewhere in Africa, is closer to 25% in Ethiopia. A paltry 2.5% of Ethiopians have access to the internet, compared with 40% in neighbouring Kenya."¹³ Regional disparities in terms of access to the Internet and mobile networks exist between Ethiopia's advantaged and disadvantaged states and ethnic groups with 4G Broadband rolled out in Addis Ababa and Tigray (advantaged areas) and unreliable 3G networks for the rest of the county.¹⁴ A certain Dr. S. Kavitha wrote an opinion in the state-owned Ethiopian Herald newspaper stating that "there are now 3 million Ethiopian based Facebook and Twitter accounts..."¹⁵ This is obviously "a paltry" compared to the country's 100M population size.

Whenever the state let its guard down, students and the rest of the population with access have continued to use new media technologies to purvey images of live torture, killings, maiming and imprisoning of Oromo civilians. In many instances, protesters recorded short clips of killings and atrocities by security forces, such as the open air torture of civilians in Sululta town¹⁶, and indiscriminate mass shooting of civilians at close range in Oromia locations such as Bale Robe¹⁷ and Ambo, and transmitted them over social media to diaspora-based television/radio networks like Oromia Media Network, Oromo Voice Radio and ESAT TV. The collaboration between citizen journalists sharing files and these broadcast media organizations have rendered the media coverage of live events mainstream. Diaspora-based social media users reshared horrific images arriving from Oromia and Ethiopia horizontally within their networks and also shared the data with elected officials of Western nations with strong ties to the Ethiopian regime. Content shared on social media have been driven into the mainstream by bloggers, reporters, human rights groups and media organizations.

In addition to monopoly and disruptions being a big problem to Internet adoption during protests as discussed above, GSMA Intelligence¹⁸ identifies the “lack of digital skills and literacy,” as one of the “top barriers to Internet adoption by consumers in Ethiopia, accounting for the digital illiteracy rate of 62%. This also makes the country one of the most digitally illiterate countries of the world. The same study lists a 60- percent gender gap in Internet usage. Women are on the receiving end of this digital inequality. The Analytics of this author’s Twitter account (with 15.9K followers) shows that 80 percent of the followers are men and the remaining 20 percent are women.

Although some farmers who have some level of schooling are likely to have access to mobile Internet, it remains true that access to the Internet and smartphones is largely a tale of urban elites, university students, business persons and employees of international organizations and charities. Although no official figure is available, the cost of participation can be estimated to be too high for rural communities with lower income and education.

The Impact of Social Media versus the Goals of the Protesters

Since Ethiopia is off the limit to researchers in areas that are political in nature, it is very difficult to precisely quantify the impact of new media technologies on the outcomes of the social protests. The study describes the impact of social media based on information available in the public domain. Using social/new media technologies, participants in Oromo demonstrations accomplished these activities:

- Spread global awareness about crackdown on peaceful protesters;
- Galvanized further collective street actions by sharing images of those killed, injured, jailed and displaced from their land;
- Led to the creation of #OromoProtests as one of Africa’s top 2016 hashtags, which in turn led to traditional media coverage of episodes of Oromo protests and the crackdown;
- Strengthened the sense of unity and *Oromummaa* (Oromo identity) in Oromia and the diasporas.

At its peak, one of the goals of Oromo demonstrations was regime change. Protesters stated categorically that Oromia should not be ruled by Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front and its satellite party the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO). While the protesters managed to compel the regime to at least verbally “scrap” the master plan on the news media, they were unable to bring about the regime change desired because of many complex factors beyond their use of social media.

Among some of the reasons why many of the demands of Oromo protests remain unmet to this date are the totalitarian militaristic nature of the regime, the failure of Oromo political parties to step in, unite, institutionalize and lead horizontal movements to victory or stalemate. It is also perhaps true that non-violent resistance is incompatible with a totalitarian genocidal state like Ethiopia.

The imprisonment of the apt leaders of the legal opposition Oromo Federalist Congress and the eventual trumped-up incrimination and dismantling of the organization left the grassroots movement in Oromia without an on-the-ground political force directly leading and serving as the spokesperson of the movement. Diaspora-based Oromo political groups, issued solidarity statements, press releases and claims of organizing the movement, but they were ill-prepared to consolidate the gain of Oromo demonstrations. While diaspora-based activists waged strong diplomatic activities on/off social media, they were constrained by distance and the limited amount of information coming out of Ethiopia. Organizational fragmentation in the diaspora further weakened its capacity to make meaningful contribution to the just cause of freedom at home.

Countering Social Media Tools

This author wrote elsewhere covering an array of mechanisms used by the Ethiopian government to restrict the free flow of information.¹⁹ Among tactics described were the use of legislations to curb Internet freedom, freedom of speech and of press.²⁰ Dugo's previous work covered restrictions imposed by the regime between April 2014 and December 2016. This paper focuses on newer developments in terms of Ethiopian state actions to counter new media technologies utilization during the zenith of the protest from January 2016 to October 2016. The tactics in the previous paper continue to be used by the regime, but this paper is confined to state of emergency declaration, and computer crimes act number 958/2016 and their impact on Internet freedom and social media use. As *The Economist* rightly puts it, "Ethiopia's authoritarian leaders are as keen as any on the economic benefits of modern telecoms but fear the political ramifications; pesky dissidents become even more irritating when wired."²¹ The regime understands the far-reaching implications of unfettered social and new media technologies appropriation by social movements and relentlessly works to counter social media tools.

The War on Social Media

The Ethiopian government waged war against social media overtly and covertly using a variety of draconian methods. In 2016, the regime added at least three major tactics to already existing slews of draconian laws or proclamations intended to suppress free speech, internet freedom and the freedom of the press. We shall examine the state of emergency proclamation, the computer crimes proclamation no.958/2016, and other violations of user rights in sub-sections that follow.

The State of Emergency

GoE declared a six-months state of emergency on October 9, 2016 and extended it for another four months on March 30, 2016.²² The declaration instituted military command posts directed to implement sweeping restrictions on human rights in general and on the freedom of speech and assembly in particular. It is important to mention that in August and October 2016 during grand Oromo demonstrations and during a widely-attended Irreecha (Oromo Thanksgiving) festival, the military killed over one thousand Oromo civilians, 700 of them in one day.²³ Particularly relevant to this paper, this declaration banned the following things: 1) all forms of communication that government claimed “cause public disturbance and riot, including gesturing or displaying symbols of protests²⁴; 2) the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter “to contact what are called outside forces,”; 3) banned watching diaspora-based television channels such as Oromia Media Network and ESAT, which have become major sources for people interested in learning more about the ongoing protests inside the country.²⁵ Instead of addressing the root causes of the protests, the regime attempts to externalize the causes of the civil protests to bogus external causes and continues to wage a multi-pronged war on new media and its users, the Internet as well as traditional broadcast media specially those based outside the country.

In a press conference, the Ethiopian PM Haile Mariam Deslegn unexpectedly focused on social media as a major threat.²⁶ Schemm articulated the adversarial relationship between social media and the Ethiopian authorities, “The state has singled out social media as being a key factor in driving the unrest now gripping the country. Sites like Facebook, and Twitter are now largely blocked in the country, as is Internet on mobile phones, which is how most people in this country of 94 million find their way online.”

Following the August 2016 massacre of scores of protesters in Oromia and Amhara states, Ethiopia’s PM once again blamed social media and outside forces for the violence the government itself perpetrated when he spoke in denial, “We don’t know who takes ownership or is behind these protests, and sometimes they are organized by outside anti-peace forces with aim to destabilize this country and are organized through Facebook messages.”²⁷

Another high-ranking government official who went on the record attacking social media was State Minister of Foreign Affairs Ambassador Taye Atske-Selassie. The ambassador blamed social media and youth, “Some extremist groups from inside and outside have tried to divert and utilize the genuine questions of the public to their own advantages via social media.”²⁸

Evidence reveals that countering new/social media technologies has been among the top priority of GoE to prevent protesters from using them in their collective civil disobedience throughout the country. Despite overwhelming attacks on users and social media, it is clear that these scare technologies were used creatively to rattle the regime until the state used its monopoly over Ethiopia telecom to turn off social/new media whenever it felt so.

The state of emergency proclamation was just one of the tools in the regime's repressive toolbox, which severely infringed on free speech, internet freedom and press freedom, among other rights.

Computer Crimes Proclamation 958/2016

The legislation incriminating the use of computers and new media technologies has been another major addition to GoE's ever expanding toolbox for limiting freedom of speech, internet freedom and press freedom. It also contributed significantly to curbing the impact of new media use by dissidents, journalists, bloggers and protesters.

Except article 12 and its sub-articles, section three of the proclamation²⁹, "Illegal Content Data," criminalizes normal freedom of expression and information by subsuming them under overboard and vague terms such as "intimidate another person or his families..." (Article 13 (1); "causes fear, threat or psychological strain on another person..." (Article 13(2); disseminate any audio-visual data through computer systems deemed 'defamatory to the honor and reputation of another person...' The punishments for "crimes" of sending/distributing any "illegal content data" using a computer system in the form of writing, video, audio and any other picture," range from 3-10 years' imprisonment or ETB \$30,000 to 50,000 or both.

With 16 journalists and bloggers already in jail in Ethiopia, the country is not only the second largest jailor of journalists after Eritrea (17 journalists) in Africa,³⁰ but it is already well known Ethiopia routinely targets dissidents who criticize the government or those who just simply perform their duties as information and opinion producers. Article19³¹, which has conducted a detailed legal analysis on the draft version of the proclamation, also expresses its deep concern that more journalists, bloggers, computer and Internet service providers, dissident and opposition party leaders have been arrested and jailed in the process enforcing section three and other parts of this draconian law.³² The regime's "The Information Network Security Agency," which has been tasked with establishing computer crimes, will have excessive surveillance powers on everybody's internet, mobile and computer usage activities.³³

Article19's report concluded the law: "creates new criminal offenses that are likely to impact heavily on the enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression and other human rights, by extending the reach of criminal defamation and creating various new criminal offences, overreaching investigatory powers, including surveillance by law enforcement agencies."³⁴

The fact that this law extends the government's unlimited surveillance capabilities against civilians is no speculation; GoE has already been engaging in pervasive surveillance of computers and mobile devices and communications via its monopoly over the sole telecommunications and Internet service provider, Ethio Telecom.

Human Rights Watch documents in details how the regime deploys foreign surveillance technologies to record telephone conversations, to intercept emails, and to extract files from private devices and use them in court against jailed dissidents or in torture chambers to extract confessions of participation in opposition groups or outlawed rebel organizations.³⁵ The major providers of technologies used in surveillance of telecommunications have been the “Chinese Telecom giant ZTE, United Kingdom and Germany-based Gamma International’s FinFisher and Italy-based Hacking Team’s Remote Control System,”³⁶ The report further exposes that Ethiopian authorities using these and other surveillance technologies have singled out and “frequently targeted the Oromo population.”³⁷ Based on data drawn from 100 interviewees, HRW reveals intensive and extensive surveillance practices by the regime as follows:

Taped phone calls have been used to compel people in custody to confess to being part of banned groups, such as the Oromo Liberation Front, which seeks greater autonomy for the Oromo people, or to provide information about members of these groups. Intercepted emails and phone calls have been submitted as evidence in trials under the country’s flawed anti-terrorism law, without indication that judicial warrants were obtained.

On the surface of it, this legislation, like many other draconian laws passed by the regime’s rubber stamp parliament, seems to be a benevolent initiative intended to combat “computer crimes,” but in reality it is just another law with a malevolent intent of violating subjects’ human rights in general and freedom of expression and digital media usage rights in particular. It is very clear that many of the articles of proclamation number 958/2016 violate freedom of expression and information protected by international human rights instruments and binding treaties Ethiopia ratified such as Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR); and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); and Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR).³⁸

Other Violations on Internet Freedom

The most recent Freedom House reports on Internet freedom and press freedom in Ethiopia shows the country’s status as “NOT FREE.”³⁹ Resulting in a “not free” status, Ethiopia’s overall Internet freedom status has plunged to 83/100, with zero being the ‘most free’ and hundred being ‘less free.’ The following table provides detailed scores on variables Freedom House measured:



Table 1: Source: Freedom House

Through covert or overt attacks on dissidents and information producers as well as covert attack on Internet and social media infrastructure, it transpires from this report that news media and social media technologies have been effectively crippled by the regime to the point of little to no information coming out of the country after October 2016. Posts at influential hashtags such as #OromoProtests have also slowed down or have become shallow as the data supply to diaspora activists from the homeland dwindled. A brief account of how Ethiopia’s regime managed to totally restrict freedom on the net is very relevant to this paper.

While GoE disrupted Internet and mobile phone services throughout the country during the height of the protests, the regime isolated and targeted Oromia with most recurring and blanket disruptions of these services.⁴⁰ According to the Freedom House report, GoE imposed the following restrictions on the net:

- Blocked and filtered hundreds of news websites originating from the diasporas for reporting on Oromo protests;
- Arrested and prosecuted bloggers, activists and journalists for online activities.
- Imposed blanket disruption of connections to the Internet.

Many of the technical restrictions imposed by the government on users have been facilitated by the fact that the state-run Ethio Telecom monopolizes the telecommunications market, including Internet services and mobile networks. For the regime limiting Internet freedom is as easy as pushing a button and turning off services whenever it senses that its security forces are involved in committing massive atrocities with intent to hide or erase evidence for such actions.

As report after report corroborates, GoE certainly selectively filtered and blocked content by way of blocking scores of influential news outlets that “provided wall-to-wall coverage of anti-government protests,”⁴¹ such as Oromia Media Network, Ethiopian Satellite Television, Ayyaantuu.net, Opride.com etc.

Other methods of “violating user rights” included abuses of slews of draconian laws to unfairly prosecute dissidents, bloggers, journalist, opposition leaders and owners of Internet cafes. In addition to the state of emergency proclamation and the computer crime legislation examined above, it’s well known that Ethiopia has abused/misapplied laws such as “Anti-Terrorism Proclamation,” “Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation, Charities and Societies Proclamation, among others.⁴²

Comparative Impact Evaluation and Synthesis: Success and Failure Stories of New Media

Many researchers and writers warn against a “technologically deterministic argument,”⁴³ when writing about the use of social media in revolutionary movements worldwide.⁴⁴ While those who write from technological determinism point of view simplistically argue that new media/social media cause revolutions, for instance in the case of the Arab Spring, an overwhelming number of researchers, commentators and activists caution against making causal claims between social media use and regime changes. In reference to many of the successful revolutions that used social media such as The Philippines’s People Power II 2001, Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution 2011, Egypt People Power 2011, and Ukraine’s Euromaidan Revolution 2013-2014, researchers advise against drawing hasty causality and instead advise using measured language regarding the impact of social media. They describe new media technologies as additional ‘tactical tools’⁴⁵ for social and political mobilization and their roles as ‘facilitating’ ‘acerbating,’ ‘shaping,’ and ‘speeding up,’ political changes by spreading information.

In an opinion piece in *The New Yorker*, Malcom Gladwell cautioned, “Please. People protested and brought down governments before Facebook was invented. They did it before the Internet came along.”⁴⁶ Gladwell is accounting for the use of the “human voice,” as a crucial communicative act before and after the advent of new media technologies. Similarly, Castells et al⁴⁷ note, “other communicative processes and media, both wired and unwired,” were important in political protests that toppled authoritarian regimes. They cautioned against technological determinism as follows: “And, of course, revolutionary political mobilization have occurred in countries where wireless communication was lacking.”⁴⁸

This paper acknowledges the importance multiple cross-cutting variables to make a social movement succeed and/or fail. New media have shaped and facilitated Oromia-wide protests for over three years, but they have not caused them. I regard them important communicative tools in the toolbox of political protesters just like many other experts do.

Now that words of caution have been provided against technological determinism, the paper proceeds to evaluate the success and failure stories of new media appropriation in political protests.

Synthesized and extrapolated from literature reviewed for this work, the follow table summarizes the impact of social media on political protests. It's important to reiterate that we talk about the impact of new media in terms of their role in facilitating change, not in terms of cause-effect. "Success stories," means the protesters were able to achieve their goals in removing corrupt and repressive regimes. "Failure stories" means that the protesters did not achieve their overall goal of removing an incumbent president or regime or simply that the new media-enabled youth movements were hijacked by older more conservative politico-religious groups and parties.

Country	Name of Protest/Year	Main Tools Used	Evaluation of Impact
The Philippines	People Power II, 2001	Cell-phones and text messages, Internet.	Removed sitting president Joseph Estrada.
Tunisia	Jasmine Revolution, 2011	Facebook played the main role. Twitter was the next important SM.	Ousted President Ben Ali and his regime. Achieved successful democratic transition making it an exception in North Africa.
Egypt	Arab Spring, "18 Days of People Power" ⁴⁹ , Tahrir Square	Twitter (main), Facebook, Blogger collectives	Ousted long-time ruler Hosni Mubarak, but failed to lead to democratic transition because Islamists hijacked the movement and a military rule was instituted in response to that. It was a success story for a few weeks.
Ukraine	Euromaidan Revolution or Revolution of Dignity, 2013-2014 ⁵⁰	Cell phones, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, VKontakte, Google+, Instagram.	Led to removal of pro-Russian President, Victor Yanukovich from office and change in authorities. ⁵¹ Students were successful in using social media to mobilize civil protests and street actions in Maidan. Ukraine successfully transitioned to democracy after a year of civil unrest.
Ethiopia, Oromia	Oromo Protests, 2015-2016	Cell phones, Internet, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Viber.	In terms of organization and mobilization, students were successful in using social media, but the movement was violently suppressed and social media applications and other forms of communications banned. Failed to remove PM Haile Mariam Desalegn's ruling EPRDF/TPLF regime. ⁵²

The revolutions in The Philippines, Tunisia and Ukraine represent successful cases in which new media technologies were used as tactical tools to mobilize, organize and spread information in order to change incumbent regimes accused of decades of repressive policies and systematic corruption. Based on literature reviewed for this paper, these three countries also successfully transitioned to democratic administrations.

Except for Tunisia, new/social media could not deliver the desired regime change and democratic transition in Egypt and the rest of Arab Spring. The same is true for Oromo Protests in Ethiopia. The Egyptian revolution was partially successful albeit for a few weeks until Mubarak was ousted and a military rule was instituted preventing democratic transition. In a provocative editorial titled “The Failure of the Facebook Generation,” Francis Fukuyama criticized the students and liberals for inability to translate social media campaigns into a meaningful political change. According to Fukuyama⁵³, students and liberals who failed to institutionalize their desire for a democratic change lost real power to the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamists who have altered the course of the movement prompting pro-Mubarak groups and the military to grab state power. Fukuyama’s statement slightly seemed to completely and erroneously dismiss the contribution of social media when he opined, “Facebook, it seems, produces a sharp, blinding flash in the pan, but it does not generate enough heat over an extended period to warm the house.” However, he makes an important observation that in the absence of organized political parties that can institutionalize the desires of the protesters, social media alone cannot lead to a stable democratic transition.

Whereas in Egypt the the mega protests on Tahrir square were hijacked by a better organized Islamist political groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, in Oromia and Ethiopia mega protests in hundreds of cities were largely a ‘leaderless’ secular mass movement in the sense of traditional top-down approach. Some Oromo political parties claimed having initiated and organizing the massive rallies, but in reality they were not there on the ground to institutionalize and lead the public demands to victory or stalemate. The Oromo protests failed to bring down the EPRDF/TPLF regime although it has rattled it for more than three years and still does. It is inconceivable to simply attribute the limited success of Oromo rallies to Facebook and Twitter when it is actually estimated that only “three million” Facebook and Twitter accounts exist in Ethiopia.⁵⁴ In fact, the human voice, pamphlets and flyers and traditional street actions played key roles.

Social media facilitated the spread of information as well as the spread of the protests across the vast Oromia region, Ethiopia’s largest and most populous state. Students at primary, secondary and higher education levels were the leaders of the new media campaigns in Oromia. This highly civilized and non-violent pro-democracy protesters were met by a regime with a long-standing culture of using brute force at any cost. It’s the first time ever in the history of the country for years-long large-scale protests to use new media technologies notwithstanding all the restrictions and control. This development almost seemed out of its place in this totalitarian environment where the predominant thought is that regimes can only be changed by those totting guns, but not by those totting cell phones and social media applications and their human voices.

Oromia's use of new media technologies resembles that of Ukraine, Egypt and Tunisia in that the most prolific users were the youth and students. Oromia, Ethiopia's case is different from these countries in that crackdown was more virulent and the regime had the monopoly to turn the Internet and mobile phone services off as it wished. On issues of access to the Internet, social media and mobile phones, The Philippines, Ukraine, Egypt and Tunisia excelled Ethiopia, which is a laggard on the African continent.⁵⁵

The fact that the regime used the Internet, cell phones and social media applications to track and jail and even kill key leaders of the movement is similar to surveillance practices by other governments. New/social media technologies are a double-edged sword in this sense because they are useful to both protesters and regimes albeit for different reasons—to facilitate social change and to suppress social change respectively. Clearly new media technologies can be used as tools for protests and resistance, but they also serve governments in countering protests.⁵⁶ Papic and Noonan⁵⁷ explain this predicament:

The capability of governments to monitor and counteract social media developed alongside the capability of their intelligence services. In order to obtain an operating license in any country, social networking websites have to come to some sort of agreement with the government. In many countries, this involves getting access to user data, locations and network information. Facebook profiles, for example, can be a boon for government intelligence collectors, who can use updates and photos to pinpoint movement locations and activities and identify connections among various individuals... In using social media, the tradeoff for protest leaders is that they must expose themselves to disseminate their message to the masses... In Egypt, almost 40 leaders of the April 6 Movement were arrested early on in the protests, and this may have been possible by identifying and locating them through their Internet activities, particularly through their various Facebook pages.

The trend was similar to the arrests of leaders in Egypt based on intelligence gathered from their social media pages. For instance, many of the prominent leaders of the Oromo Federalist Congress, an opposition party, including its Secretary General Bekele Gerba, and high-ranking officers Dejene Tafa and Addisu Bulala were imprisoned based on information gathered on their activities online and offline during the early phase of Oromo rallies.⁵⁸ A YouTube video of Bekele Gerba's featured speech at the 2015 Oromo Studies Association conference in Washington DC was used as evidence to charge Gerba with "terrorism," when he returned to Ethiopia.⁵⁹ As an OSA featured speaker⁶⁰, Gerba was very measured and non-violent in his approach as he described the multi-faceted repressions against the Oromo including the regime grabbing Oromia's land in and around the capital city. Gerba was a professor who translated Dr. Martin Luther King's famous speech "I Have a Dream," into his native Afan Oromo language during his previous four years in prison.⁶¹

Despite being falsely accused of ‘terrorism’, Gerba regularly demonstrated his commitment to non-violence. In the case of the arrest, imprisonment and sentencing of Yontan Tesfaye Regassa, opposition Blue Party leader and Facebook user, who posted events during Oromo protests, Facebook was used again as a ‘boon for government intelligence collectors.’ Regassa was slapped with trumped up terrorism charges because of the following specific comment he posted on his Facebook page, “government used ‘force against the people instead of peaceful discussion’.”⁶²

Conclusion

Multiple case studies of new media technologies and political protests point to the reality that in authoritarian states where the traditional mass media are controlled by ruling elites, new/social media are strong alternative platforms to express the grievances of protesters seeking regime changes.⁶³ In the case of Oromo Protests, new media served as alternative platforms in a country where the independent press has been effectively crippled and the state controlled media serve as propaganda machines. In traditional media environments that continue to be “dominated by the state and corporate interests,”⁶⁴ new media are indeed the only crucial alternative means of communication for the grassroots as well as for opposition political actors. Studies show media are used as tools to mobilize, organize and share protest-related information and agenda. Until they were disrupted by states, new media technologies played key roles in spreading information and in coordinating protests activities over vast time zones and geographic expanses. They are essential to introducing and networking participants of “distributed political protests.”⁶⁵ In many cases, social media connect participants of a social movement with one another and also with protest-generated leaders as well as with leaders of political parties who often capitalize on the networking power of new media tools to negotiate power. In the case of Oromo protests, apart from spreading information and daily protest agenda and activities, new media played a lasting role of building Oromo collective consciousness and identity at levels hitherto unknown.

Similar to other cases, Oromo protests used new media technologies in planning, coordinating and implementing protest activities across vast geographic areas. For the first time in history, new media facilitated the mobilization of the Oromo from all corners of their home state of Oromia. Decades before Oromo Protests, the Oromo lacked a means of scheduling and coordinating events on the same date; as a result, when one part of Oromia protested, other parts did not know what was going on elsewhere. During recent large-scale protests, it took hours and days to spread information across this large region because of social/new media, but before that, it took weeks and months for information to travel from one part of Oromia to another. This by itself is a very significant development in a country nobody expected social media would be used to the extent it had been to rattle the regime to its core and to prompt it to impose blanket restrictions on communications.

Unlike some successful cases we examined, protesters in Oromia and Ethiopia were not able to achieve the regime change they desired largely because of the total state control over telecommunications infrastructure and services provision. Millions of highly-disciplined, creative, non-violent and pro-democracy protesters were met with a brute military state that preferred to respond to peaceful expressions of popular grievances with ten months of nationwide state of emergency declaration and military deployment to quell the uprisings. The protesters pushed the envelope as far as they could and rattled the regime to the core for more than a year, but there is only so much social media can accomplish when political parties failed to institutionalize the demands of the people and to lead them to victory or stalemate. Even if Oromo protests' appropriation of new media technologies did not topple the regime and result in a democratic order as intended, it has an enduring contribution to the formation of deep political consciousness and identity. Students and youth across the nation displayed magnificent creativity by using social media to attempt to unseat an incumbent repressive and corrupt regime. This has been an unprecedented and novel experience which will form the foundation for future political movements. Oromia and Ethiopia will never be the same after these protests.

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