

The Role Of Facebook As A Digital Public Sphere For Political Deliberations And Mobilization In Ethiopia's Pre-Transitional Period

Solomon Tabor¹, Jemal Mohammed², Amanuel Gebru³

¹ A senior instructor at Dilla University and PhD candidate

² (Ph.D) Associate Professor at Bahir Dar University

³(Ph.D) Assistant professor at Addis Ababa University

Abstract

This article examines the role of Facebook as a digital public sphere platform for political deliberation and mobilization in Ethiopia's pre-transition period. The core reason why Facebook is chosen for this specific study among the multitudes of other social networking sites is that, it has gained significant traction in being the most preferred digital forum of political discussion in Ethiopia. In order to generate vital data for the research, Focus Group Discussions and In-depth- interviews were conducted. Participants for the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were purposively selected from the towns of BahirDar, Ambo and Mekele youth who use Facebook for political information. The data from both FGDs and In-depth Interviews in the study sites were analyzed thematically. The findings included themes of online anonymity and security, inclusiveness and participation, pervasive corruption and graft among government officials, incompetence of government officials, power sharing among nations and nationalities, contentious historical narratives, ethnic rivalry and strife political ideology. The platform also served as a catalyst for political mobilization. The study also reveals that Facebook added verve, energy and brought about a digital political communication revolution within the customary political trend of communication, political rendezvous and political partaking.

Keywords: Digital public sphere, political mobilization, Facebook, political deliberation

Introduction

Traditional media have been the primary information provider for quite long but while their role has been significant globally in terms of the democratization endeavor. Those same media have had significant limitations in terms of serving ordinary citizens liberally. As the media have been

fundamentally state or corporate interest promoters, limiting access to ordinary people and curbing or silencing their voices have been common (Banda, Mudhai, & Tettey, 2009; Williams, & Carpini, 2011; Moyo, 2009). It is social media that come close to realizing international declarations and national constitutional provisions on citizens' communication rights, besides communication opportunities. These rights are enshrined in national and international statutes including Ethiopia's. It is clearly stated in EPRDF constitution article 29 and it includes "The right to freedom of expression; the right to seek, receive, distribute or disseminate information, opinions and ideas through any media".

These rights include the right to convey information within the limits of the law and using communication technology in organizing communicative groups. Whilst a number of social media technologies such as Twitter and YouTube have proliferated as enablers of freedom of expression and association (Shirky, 2009), Facebook remains to be the most popular of the lot (Abreham and Tibebe, 2019).

As in many other developing countries, Facebook has been the leading social media platform in Ethiopia used by the youth (56.7% users) followed by YouTube (18.5% users) (status counter, 2017).

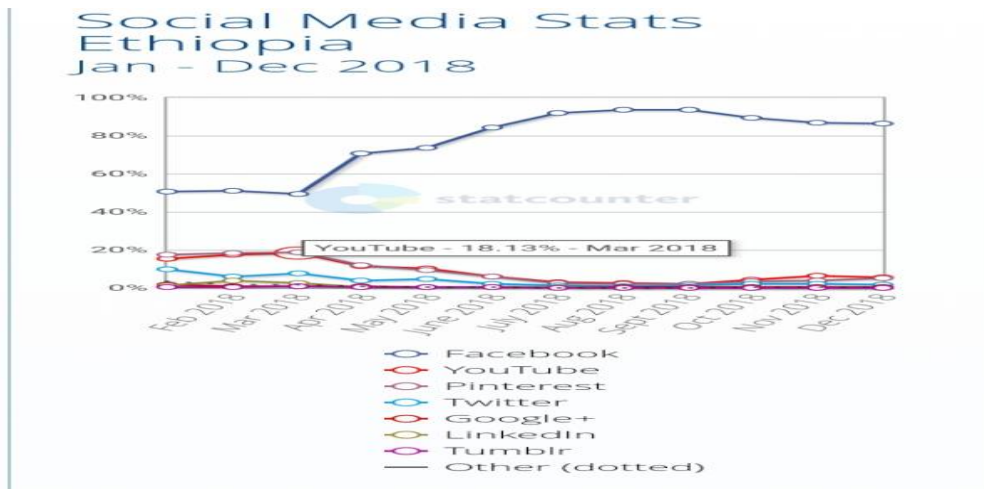


Fig.1. Social Media status in Ethiopia during the pre-transition period.

Facebook played a major role in the 2016 G.C huge political protests especially in Oromia and Amhara regions. The public protests that ranged from peaceful demonstrations, marches, rallies, and vigil to outright vandalism occurred in many parts of Oromia and Amhara regions, often turning deadly, which led to emergency proclamations banning protests and limiting media activity including digital opportunities (Kuo, 2016). Despite the emergency proclamation, mass protests became widespread and continued unabated across the big states and the federal capital with triggers of various socioeconomic

and political character including corruption and abuse of power (Witte, Burger, & Ianchovichina, 2020). And that became rampant and of which the ruling EPRDF despite self-awareness and public admission and promises of deep reform, was simply unable to meet the demands (Allo, 2016; Aalen, 2020). Social media and Facebook in particular seemed inflammatorily involved in the waves of protests, which continued for much of the pre-transitional period (Dugo, 2017).

In spite of the low figure of Facebook users in Ethiopia compared to the total population, the platform's effect was profoundly felt. And the question that would follow is how the limited number of Facebook users managed to mobilize the youth and how they made use of the Facebook platform as a digital public sphere. It would be necessary to understand how the activists and active partakers on Facebook were able to successfully play off the strengths of the social networking capabilities of the platform by capitalizing on its "many-to-many" communication and the speed with which information could be disseminated. In more specific terms, the role of Facebook as a digital public sphere and 'a site of conversation' needs to be investigated in relation to its role in political mobilization in the period under study.

The study is based on insights from Castells (2001) 'networked social movement' as well as the critical school of participatory communication for social change (Beltrán1993) and youth digital activism (Milan, 2013). The study is further motivated by the studies of Facebook revolutions in other countries around the world that explored the social media effect (Harb, 2011; Rane & Salem 2012; Trottier & Fuchs 2014). Hence, this article examines the role of Facebook as a digital public sphere for political information exchange and mobilization.

2. Objectives

- **General Objective**

The general objective of this article is to examine the role of Facebook as a digital public sphere for political deliberation and mobilization.

- **Specific Objectives**

The study aimed to

Reveal the approach used to instigate political mobilization by the youth in the study regions

Identify the themes in the Facebook discourses in the study regions.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

Research design creates a roadmap of how the researcher intends to study and addresses the research objective; and hence, the research design employed in this study is explanatory. As Silverman (2011) points out, an effective research design considers the range of methods of data collection researchers can use, making sure the method is appropriate, avoiding too many data collection methods, and lastly making sure that one does not collect too much data.. As it is known, the main purpose of such studies is formulating a problem for in-depth investigation with an emphasis on the explanation of ideas.

3.2. Population and sampling of the study

Site selection and participant recruitment were done based on the data requirements of the study. Participants typically had experience with the digital world of social media as a site of protest and the requisite willingness to share thoughts, perspectives and positions.

Three considerations guided the qualitative study participant selection. First was consideration of relevant sample characteristics in relation to the objectives of the research and the population to which inferences would be applicable. The particular population characteristics were accordingly specified to the demographic category of youth. Next was generating a list of ideal sites for relevant data gathering from suitable participants. From the list the most relevant sites would be selected as being the most representative in terms of data generation. Bahir Dar and Ambo were chosen as a research sites due to the fact that there were active political activities mainly catalyzed by the Social media activists.

Besides, many activists on Facebook platform happened to be from Amhara and Oromia regions. Hence the research areas are intentionally selected as there were active political mobilization and deliberation centering those places. Ambo town is commonly regarded as ‘the epicenter of Oromo struggle’. And Bahir Dar too was an active spot where there were active political mobilization and social movement against the EPRDF government. As a result of the active political mobilization and social movement, those areas were the frequent topics of the Facebook actors. There were/are many ‘activists’ and active users of the Facebook platform from Tigray region in general and Mekelle town in particular. Besides, much of the political conversation on Facebook was focused on the TPLF party which is the leader of the Tigray regional state. Thirdly in the sampling procedure was to determine the youth characteristics and

profile in relevant terms to the study's data requirements. Thus youth with online activity relevant to the protests were identified and recruited by research assistants.

The study employed purposive sampling. Thus, focus group participants were purposively chosen for their active participation in Facebook political discourses. Besides, the key informants in all the three sites were purposively selected for their social media activism and influence, expressed among other things, in their possession of significant figures of followers and the considerable influence they command.

3.3. Data Gathering Tools and Sources

3.3.1. In-depth interview

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants. These informants are well-known social media activists and influencers with many followers. Renowned social media activists were selected as key informants, for they are massively influential in agenda-setting, disseminating those agendas, shaping the political thoughts of the youth via their pages and mobilizing them for action. This tool is chosen because it was difficult to get activists in group for discussions as they are living in different part of the country. And the tool helps to get information in depth and to clarify any preconceived idea with follow up questions.

3.3.2. Focus Group Discussion

Focus Group Discussions were conducted with selected youths living in Ambo, Bahir Dar and Mekelle cities who are active users of Facebook. The discussion points were prepared in line with the research objective and each session took more than an hour. The discussions were recorded, transcribed, translated, coded and organized under specific themes for discussion. The respondents of the FGD were active users of the Facebook platform within the age group of 20-35. Six of the research participants were female and the rest were males. They reported having educational background which ranged from high school certificate to graduate degree. They were chosen purposely using purposive sampling technique based on how frequently and actively they use the Facebook platform.

They were informed regarding the purpose of the research and that their responses would be used for research purpose only. The FGDs and interviews were carried out by the researchers and assistant data gatherers. Assistants were hired from the study areas who spoke the local language. In all three

assistant data gatherers were hired from the three research areas so as to facilitate the translation and reduce access barriers.

3.3.3 Data processing, Analysis and Interpretation

Since the study employs wholly qualitative approach, the data generated from in-depth interviews and FGDs were dealt with qualitatively using thematic analysis. The coding for the research was done manually by the researcher based on inductive approaches using thematic coding. Categorizing the coding frame and determining the theme for the analysis of the research was done based on the common coding frame developed from the interview and FGD data.

4. Results and Discussions

Results from the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews from the three study regions are presented. The Data that came from youthful respondents of both male and female categories of Amhara, Oromo and Tigray ethnic groups are coded and developed into themes for analysis. The data is presented in the form of themes pertaining to social media as it relates to the social movement of the period in Ethiopia.

4.1 Information empowerment for mobilization

It is important for modern society that for democracy to function effectively information and ideas should be able to flow freely without undue editorial or censorship bottlenecks. Because information provision from state/corporate media has been limited in numerous ways, Facebook has filled the access gap by providing alternative information. Facebook has helped, despite the challenges of misinformation, to empower the youth in political information. In an attempt to address how the Facebook played as a political information provider, its role of empowering the youth with political information is dealt with.

Pertaining to its information empowerment purpose, Participant of FGD1 asserts that;

The Facebook communication platform has empowered marginalized groups to achieve their far reaching goal of mobilizing the youth with their own political outlook. Without the information sharing enabled by Facebook, getting momentum for political mobilization and, social movement would have been almost impossible. The platform as an information space has helped to bring issues to the publics' attention that could not

be entertained via mainstream public/government media (Personal Interview, Bahir Dar, May 2017).

Facebook, as an information challenger to those of 'state' media that are typically heavily edited, makes a contribution to creating a balanced political information ecosystem. It empowers citizens as information sources and liberates them from being relegated as passive information receivers. It makes information available to the public that might or might not be liked by political leaders/officials."It makes available information that officials may not necessarily like or perhaps want hidden or destroyed. In this regard, Facebook in the transitional period was a significant site for user generated information that animated and empowered the protest movement preceding the transition, helping a 'cognitive liberation' (Meyer 2004).The information dissemination power of Facebook is clear from the observation that "Facebook users and their social networks – users have an average of 130 friends"(Facebook, 2009).These may help to raise or solidify the social state of consciousness or collective consciousness that is necessary to animate a movement.

The above excerpt of the FGD goes in line with the view that the Facebook platform promotes political participation by "offering additional and convenient pathways to participation; generating new forms of political engagement and participation; and engaging audiences traditionally characterized by lower levels of political engagement and activity such as young people, individuals with lower socio-economic status or isolated citizens" (Casteltrione, 2016).

In a bid to understand how the Facebook communication platform has served as a digital public sphere, issues have been pointed out from the findings of the individual in-depth interview and the Focus Group Discussions. These points explain which/what issues are/were hot on Facebook and how those issues attract the Facebook user base for further discussion, debate or discourse on the platform.

4.2. Inclusiveness and participation

An important digital theme relevant to democracy as an enabler of participation was also raised. It locates digital inclusion in Facebook inclusivity as an important platform for political discourse. Thanks to inclusivity, the interactional communication process realized and catalyzed via the platform has shifted the ordinary political communication trend that was massively muffled in fear of the government into an active political engagement and political action. Trottier and Fuchs (2014)show that the political

utility of the Facebook platform benefits democracy by expanding people's horizons, exposing them to new ideas. Hence, a new, dynamic, potentially viable and inclusive form of digital communication in which every adult can have a say has become the popular tool for political deliberation.

Pertaining to whether Facebook is an open and inclusive platform, the findings of FGD conducted in Mekelle city of Tigray region ascertains the above statement, except for emphasizing and criticizing the irresponsible use of the platform. To this end, FGD₃ affirms that;

The platform has created an opportunity for the youth to openly express political views. Whether it is pro- or anti-government, one can express his/her political view via the Facebook platform. Despite the fact that some use the platform irresponsibly, it has massively been used to amplify the voice of those whose views are relegated (FGD₃, Mekelle, June 2017).

Having been used as a platform for political discourse, Facebook has added verve, energy and brought about 'a digital political communication revolution' within the customary political trend of communication, political rendezvous and political partaking. It has enabled the youth to massively engage in the politics and caused vigorous participation.

Hence, via the appliances of Facebook, the youth have been discoursing online, communicating via in-box, commenting in comment thread, reacting in like, dislike button, posting photo, video, cartoons, graphics and animation. Thus, the platform has brought about a new form of political discourse engagement opportunity for the able youth.

Besides serving as a convenient pathway, creating a new form of political engagement, the platform has keyed up and stimulated the low level political participants. It served as a voice for the voiceless, and magnified the voices of citizens with lower socio-economic status. On top of the above view, the political and economic calamities which were disregarded by the public media and the unheard voices of the public have become the causes for the Facebook platform to get a wide acceptance and to be a digital public sphere. To this end informant All₁ asserts that;

Those who are economically discontented and who believe that the root cause of the economic sabotage is the political maneuver have massively joined the platform. And

they used the platform to air their voice on political normalization or change to redress the economic discrepancy. So the desperation, unemployment and stifled political situation have worsened the muffled protest voices which were disregarded to the highest degree by the public media. And hence, the subdued voices had to be heard and Facebook once again has served as the media for those who are supposedly overlooked to take their share from the national economy pie (Personal interview with All₁, Ambo, July 2017).

The digital public sphere is indeed "a discursive arena that is home to citizen debate, deliberation, agreement and action" (Villa 1992). It appears to be further characterised by inclusivity of participation on issues of shared concern, important aspects of what Habermas would call the 'ideal speech situation', as enabled by Facebook and other Social Networking Sites. Facebook is above all demonstrably a site enabling political agency that is so much in demand in contexts characterised by grievances and competing identities (Habermas, 1964).

4.3. Anonymity and security concerns

The other vital issue that magnified the number of Facebook users and its role as a digital public sphere is the challenge one faces to express one's view freely on public media. The FGD carried out in Ambo town reveals that only two participants have a single Facebook account with their true identity, the rest have at least two Facebook accounts with two or more different names and candidly write, comment or express their political perspective or of others via their fake or abbreviated accounts. The participants attributed that they use hidden identity to express their political ideas because they do not think that freedom of expression is fully secured.

The participants of the FGD in Ambo town unanimously avowed that they do not feel safe to express their view freely using their true online identity. FGD₂₄ asserted that the price paid for candid political deliberation was awfully dangerous; hence, one is forced to take part within the digital world such as Facebook using a fake name, photo, and profile (FGD₂₄ in Ambo). Hence, aided by the possibility to use the platform and participate in discussions or debate without real one's identity augmented the user base and magnitude or influence of Facebook as a digital platform.

4.4. Ethnic rivalry, strife and political ideology

The deliberations, argumentation, explication and/or personal reflection on ethnic oriented political issues have been among the pressing issues on Facebook. BII₁, one of the prominent 'activists', claims that the threat of inter-ethnic tensions in Ethiopia is one of the hot issues on Facebook that contributed a great deal in making the platform a hot discussion forum. The activist asserts that;

As the regions are not entirely ethnically homogeneous, it initiated motives for competition over the regions' resources and power sharing and that caused ethnic-based group mobilization. Ethiopia's population is highly diversified with over 80 different ethnic groups, and ethnic minorities are found nested inside every of the ethnic homelands. Therefore the tense ethnic based identity politics put millions of ethnic minorities in a precarious situation. It essentially provides rights to land, jobs in public offices and representation at regional and federal levels based on ethnic identity. And the minorities living in every region are facing exclusions. We conduct such kinds of arguments on Facebook trying to influence the existing ethnic based political ideology (Personal interview with BII₁, Bahir Dar, May, 2017).

MII₁ is a popular name in the Facebook world. The online activist points out that what has been discussed on Facebook is a reflection of the politics on the ground. He affirms that neither the ideology nor the constitution should be blamed as there is nothing wrong with these. Instead, the relevant officials should be the ones to be blamed for the failed implementation. He claims that if one wants to know the essence of the political discussions and debates on Facebook, one needs to understand the real political environment. He further contends that;

Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop their own language; to express, to develop and promote their culture. The federal system gave the Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia full measure of self-governance which includes the right to establish institutions of government within the territory that it inhabits and to equitable representation in state and federal governments. So it is not the political ideology that posed various discontents rather the implementation of it (Personal interview with MII₁, Mekelle, June 2017 Interview in Mekelle with MII₁).

On the issue of the political ideology, All₂, a journalist, political analyst and an active participant on Facebook who had been writing on a popular newspaper named 'Addis Neger', asserts that "the ethnic based federalism should entirely be dismantled, and it is a time bomb that collapses the country when the time comes". Thus the discourse on Facebook concerning the political ideology swings between supporters and refuters of the existing political ideology. Some firmly sides with the existing ideology and others steadfastly oppose it. Hence, among the issues that helped to mobilize and politically awaken the youth are the discussions, on Facebook, regarding political ideology, ethnic rivalry and strife. The interviewees reflect the above views on Facebook and ethnic issues are among the main and hot enabling factor for the Facebook communication platform to be a digital public sphere.

Hence, the view that ranges from depicting the ethnic based federalism as an instrument to equitable growth and development to considering it as a time bomb that set millions of ethnic minorities living in different regions in a precarious situation is entertained on Facebook. The platform, hence, was used by activists and their followers to advance their view on political ideology. However, the Ethiopian government in its address to the UN protested that "social media has empowered populists and extremists to exploit people's genuine concerns and to spread bigotry and hatred "(Amnesty International, 2016).

4.5 Incompetence of government officials

Among the issues that circulate around Facebook is the academic and leadership competence of the government officials. Those 'activists' who oppose the government in power and even some others who are hand and glove with the government critically criticize the competence of the government officials. Videos showing the poor language (English) proficiency of the government officials holding a ministerial position are frequently posted and shared among groups and followers. The main actors on Facebook claim that most of them are not professionally fit and their credentials were either from diploma mills or thesis was the work of academic ghost writers. The mockery supported with video footage ranged from language (English) proficiency problems to basic leadership skills deficiencies.

Pertaining to the reason why some activists were devoted to exposing academic fraud and fake qualifications relating to government officials that cause a serious reputational damage was the follow up question of the FGD. FGD₁₂ explains the issue in that;

Among the ways that activists used to widen their circle of influence is to expose government officials' incompetence and leadership skills gaps. They do so by posting videos of government officials' interviews with foreign media and mocking their language proficiency. It helped the activists to mobilize the youth further and to align their followers on their side. And that signals a strong message for the youth and the Facebook community that how incapable the government officials are as a leader. It makes the youth to think that they are not better than me and hence will not accept them as a leader. So the youth who are in Facebook is intentionally agitated by 'activists' to underestimate and overlook the government officials and that helps to catalyze the political protest (Focus Group Discussion, Bahir Dar, May, 2017).

Hence, the above data unveils that the principal actors on Facebook use the platform to expose the limitations in academic and leadership quality and skill of the high rank government officials. And in setting such kind of agenda, active partakers of the platform increase the involvement and participation on Facebook.

4.6 .Contentious historical narratives

Among the issues that served to mobilize the youth for protests which is aided by Facebook were historical narratives. Narratives of victimhood and historical narratives were used on Facebook as a political weapon to advance group or individual involvement on the platform.

A discussant claims that;

Most of the narratives that are used to build walls between nations and regions in the country are believed to be brewed along with the downfall of the 'dergue' regime and the advent and expansion of the TPLF led political regime. The narratives intentionally came into being for divide and rule saga of the TPLF party. The narratives are devised by the TPLF because it is a minority group and hence it had to devise a strategy to rule the country for a longer period. And hence formulated almost a new thesis called 'the oppressive' and 'the oppressed' (FGD₁₃ conducted in Bahir Dar, May, 2017).

Pertaining to the historical narratives that have been used to propel the verve of the youth participating in the Facebook communication platform, BII₂ asserts that

The main stream politics which had been principally formulated by the TPLF led EPRDF government had intentionally portrayed the Amhara nation as oppressor. And this depiction has also been reflected in the Facebook political discourse. The TPLF coined a new terminology to 'name' and 'shame' the Amhara people living in their own region and elsewhere in different parts of the country. And the common term brought into play to 'name' and 'shame' the Amhara people are 'Sefare' meaning 'the settler', 'Nefteгна' meaning 'gun bearer'. And hence, the Amhara people who reside in various regional states of Ethiopia are usually framed on Facebook as land-grabbers and expansionists. And accepting this frame as it is, and catalyzed by the TPLF digital army, many of the activists' and their followers have fallen in the trap (Personal Interview with Bll₂, Bahir Dar, May, 2017)

There is also the issue of cultural devaluation and marginalization. Thus with regards to historical narrative All₁ asserts that

.....the great people of Oromo have long been denied of political power and the proper economic share it deserves. Therefore it is difficult for me to take the history of Ethiopia as the history of Oromo (Personal interview with All₁, Ambo, July, 2017)

Hence, it is indicative that, the Facebook platform has been used to discuss historical narratives which are polarized as perceived by different partakers of the platform. Narratives were used to mobilize the youth along the lines of 'admirers of the monarchial era' and "critics of the feudal times'. The digital platform was credited with offering opportunities for the varied, often contradictory narratives, of Ethiopia's past and recent history. But more importantly, it is alternative narratives that benefited the most as official or state-sponsored narratives could be supported by the state media.

Indeed, the communication action of the youth may be said to have subsumed the following capabilities and opportunities (Kavada, 2016):

"The capacity to manage and regulate the conversations with targets and adversaries; the capacity to persuade, to make compelling arguments, texts, visuals that sway public opinion, targets and adversaries; the capacity to articulate, to link different sites, actors, conversations and create alliances

and coalitions; and the capacity to represent—to speak on behalf of (at least a part of) society, to assume and define its collective voice” (Kavada, 2016).

4.7. Political Power sharing among nations and nationalities

Contention regarding equitable and legitimate Political power sharing among Ethiopia’s diverse ethno-cultural groups was another pressing issue used to mobilize the youth on Facebook. FGD1₂ asserts and all the participants unanimously agreed that;

Nations and nationalities did not have true political power as the regional leaders were TPLF appointees that clung to power so long as they served the interest of TPLF. The leadership in Amhara regional state was ‘surrogate leadership’. Only loyal ‘cadres’ of TPLF were appointed to various positions of the regional state. The federal system was a bogus arrangement as regional leaders were ‘TPLF lackeys’ who didn’t have real powers to decide on important matters (FGD conducted in Bahir Dar, May, 2017).

Activists on Facebook frequently use the issue to detach the youth from the ones who lead the region. All₁ avows that;

Regional leaders did not have true political power; they were simply ‘messengers’ of the TPLF party. They are repeating as parrots their masters’ commands and they were not appointed in the first place if they had a slight opposition to the true power holders. Hence, neither the people they administer nor majority of the nation accepted and respected them as leaders. And one of the reasons that caused the youth to march on the street opposing the government is because of lack of a true power delegation (Personal interview with All₁, Ambo, July, 2017).

Pertaining to lack of a true power delegation, MII₂, an active member of the ‘Digital Weyane’ group asserts that

It was up to the ones who were termed to be the servant of the TPLF if they were willing to be loyal servants, and then there is no reason to blame TPLF. Portraying TPLF as ‘oppressor’ and ‘looter’ is a narrative by some ‘Amhara’ and ‘Oromo’ activists to get name and fame among their followers. To be called a good politician in Ethiopia, it only

takes to blame, insult the TPLF and put all the curse and faults on it. Regional states have been ruled by individuals who are natives to the area; no one has ever gone from Tigray to any regional state and claimed to administer the region. So it is up to the regional states to defend their political and economic integrity (Personal interview with MII₂, Mekelle, June 2017).

Hence, 'activists' and active partakers mainly from Oromia and Amhara regions used the Facebook platform to mobilize the youth around the issue that regional leaders are simply surrogates and were neither capable nor trustworthy to address the political and economic queries of the youth. This characterization widened the gap between the leaders and the youth, making the leaders lose credibility. They had been portrayed as 'puppets' of TPLF aiding the political mobilization, and energizing the aggressive political protests and social movement.

Moreover, from the data one can easily deduce that regional leaders had been portrayed on Facebook as appointees of the TPLF party. The issue of sharing equitable power among the nations and nationalities in Ethiopia had massively been utilized on the Facebook platform. The 'equitable power sharing' debate had been used to set the youth in motion and to bring about emotional detachment from the ones controlling offices in Amhara and Oromia regions. Upon frequent swirl on the cause by the 'activists' of the two largest national groups in the country, in terms of population and occupying a large geographical terra firma, the counter hegemonic narrative contributed its part for full-fledged street protests. Thus lack of true delegation of power to regional states had been among the factors that constantly spiraled on Facebook which was used for political mobilization among the youth community in Amhara and Oromia regional states. In essence, this was as aspect of identity as a political issue with aspiration for more power claims.

4.8 Corrupt and crooked practices of government officials

The issue of corruption has been among the frequently used mobilizing factor by 'activists' to set the youth in motion against the government. Embezzlement by government officials supported with or without evidence has been the imperative matter within the Facebook world that caused great resentment among the youth against the government. The views by the opposition and the pro-government 'activists' were quite contradictory. The former depict the 'regime' as agent of corruption and mal-practice and the latter portray it as agent of development.

BII1 expounds his view on the issue that;

A corruption network had been set up almost throughout the country and government officials had been diving in the ocean of corruption and it was exacerbated as there was no accountability. They themselves admitted and made public admission after they went through what they call 'Gemgema'¹. Thus it is obvious that the country's wealth has been looted and this has been frequently posted on Facebook (Personal interview with BII1, Bahir Dar, May, 2017).

The activists, therefore, boldly stressed that they expose the corrupt practices of the government officials to their followers and use it to further activate the youth for mobilization. Amid the highly rocketing unemployment rate and poverty in the country, using corruption news as a weapon against the government surely worked to incite the youth for protest and mobilization. Thus Facebook's role in facilitating the exposure of official misbehavior, abuse of public trust and other mis-deeds has enabled it to be a digital public sphere to express citizens' concern.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

5.1. Conclusions

In the period of pre-transition, the Facebook communication platform contributed a great deal in serving as an inclusive and open digital public sphere. The qualitative data reveals that the Facebook platform had served as a digital public sphere during periods of opposition. As a convenient pathway, creating a new form of political engagement, the platform keyed up and stimulated the low level political participants.

The political deliberation on Facebook is a replica of the polarized political situation on the ground. The view that ranges from depicting the ethnic based federalism as an instrument to equitable growth and development to describing it as a time bomb that placed millions of ethnic minorities living in different regions in a precarious situation is entertained on Facebook. The platform, hence, has been used by activists and their followers to advance their view of the political ideology.

¹It is a kind of a serious, continual and customary EPRDF party ethic that members go through a solemn self and group evaluation

The principal actors on FB used the platform to expose the limitations in academic and leadership quality and skill of the high ranking government officials. And in doing that they make use of the platform to further aggravate the youth for protest in that the officials are incapable of leading the nation and they are in no way good enough to solve or address the youth queries or tribulations. The issue of dictating equitable power among the nations and nationalities in Ethiopia had massively been utilized on the Facebook platform. And it had been used to set the youth in motion and to bring about emotional detachment from the ones controlling offices in Amhara and Oromia region.

There was a reported excessive use of force by the government security forces and that has been used by the Facebook actors to mobilize the youth for further protest. The goal behind exposing the unlawful use of force by the government is to broaden the horizon of the protest to every side of the country and to awake the international community and put pressure on the government.

5.2. Recommendations for further research

While the present study has attempted to fill the lacunae in the research literature on Facebook and its role as a public sphere in Ethiopia's pre-transition period, it may be necessary to explore further areas of new media and political engagement Thus:

- More studies are needed on the Ethiopian transition period that followed the Facebook revolution in Ethiopia to determine the trajectory of the role of social media.
- Studies should also investigate how the youth would find Youtube as a social media platform given its success and popularity
- Studies would further be needed to find out how the technological features of the different social media make them more/less suited for political engagement than others.

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