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Balancing journalistic practice and personal disclosures among Ethiopian journalists in a state media context

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Journalists usually struggle to maintain private affairs with their professional responsibilities while practising journalism. This article scrutinizes the interplay between journalists' professional and individual exposures and its impacts on the culture of journalism practice in the Ethiopian state media perspective of Amhara Media Corporation (AMC). Qualitative research method, along with in-depth interviews and document analysis, was used to collect data. Semi-structured questions were forwarded to twelve purposively selected journalists working in AMC. Individual-level analysis of the Hierarchy of Influences Model (HIM) and Individual Level of Branding were applied as theoretical templates. Findings reveal that journalists' journalistic contents are exposed to numerous occupational-level perspectives. Individual backgrounds and professional dilemmas journalists face are the dominant challenges while practising professional journalism. Journalists' academic qualifications and upbringing do have strong linkages with their culture of journalism practice. The interface between sensitive reporting on politics, ethnicity, religion and professionalism is seen resulted in eroding journalistic integrity and creating professional dilemmas among journalists in Ethiopia. It is recommended that media organizations have comprehensible working guidelines and editorial policies to alleviate

the blurred lines between individual exposures and the professionalism of journalists in Ethiopia.

Keywords: hierarchy of influences model, ideological branding, individual-level analysis, journalist background, sensitive reporting, political stance, professional dilemma

Introduction

Journalism practice varies significantly across diverse countries and culture. The notion of ‘deconstructing journalism culture’ is used by Hanitzsch and colleagues to explain the variety of worldwide engagements that make up journalistic culture or practice. The concept of journalism culture is ‘a specific set of ideas and practices by which journalists, consciously and unconsciously, legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful for themselves and others’ (Hanitzsch 2007: 369). The personal backgrounds of journalists in Africa significantly intertwine with their professional working dilemmas, presenting a complex web of challenges that can influence the integrity and objectivity or usually conflicted with established journalism guidelines in their journalistic endeavours. Within this context, it is evident that many journalists are frequently confronted with myriads of ethical dilemmas while selecting and reporting on sensitive news events. Notably, there exists a persistent pressure to compromise standards due to possible harassment by the governmental bodies, organization and possible threats of prosecution for disclosure of sensitive issues besides their personal upbringings (Akpede 2011).

In Ethiopia, most of the standards for journalism practice have been originated from western working perspectives because their curriculums in journalism education are imitated from the West. Though it is difficult to identify all facets of journalism culture, it is necessary to first deconstruct journalism culture in terms of its constituents and conceptual dimensions (Hanitzsch 2007). One thing that seems certain is that there has not yet developed a global journalism culture (Weaver and Willnat 2012). Meanwhile, a plethora of research shows and prominent scholars suggest multi-layered hybridization of professional cultures in journalism as a potential solution to the disjuncture of journalism in the global news environment (Preston 2009; Hallin and Mancini 2012, 2017; Voltmer 2012; Waisbord 2013; Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez 2014; Dobek-Ostrowska 2015; Mancini 2015; Mellado et al. 2017).

Contextualizing the journalism practice of Ethiopia’s state-run media industry in the Global South is a particular manifestation of the multifaceted hybridization of journalistic cultures, apart from the western-oriented media practice. In this continuum, Ethiopia’s media landscape has a traditionally unpredictable reputation, due to an intensive degree of control throughout its history (Skjerdal 2012; Stremlau 2011; Moges 2017, 2021, 2024; Kebede et al. 2022, 2023, 2024; Mekonnen 2022; Kiflu et al. 2023; Wassie et al. 2024). Regional media in Ethiopia is a recent development that is barely a quarter of a century old, which Amhara Media Corporation (AMC)

was established in 1994 as part of a regional-based media in Ethiopia (Kebede et al. 2022). AMC, which is claimed as Public Service Broadcasting (PSB), is owned, funded and controlled by the Amhara National Regional State (ANRS) and responsible to the region's council (Kebede et al. 2022, 2023, 2024).

Due to its operational mandate, AMC is partisan media, and the political institutions in control of these practices resulted in contentious media practices in Ethiopia. In practice, because PSB is subject to stringent government influence and control, it fails to live up to societal expectations (UNESCO 2022), and Kebede et al. assert that 'they are PSB by name, but practically owned by the ruling party/government' (2024: 3). The political pressures have been commonly seen in the media scenario in the country (Moges 2021; Wassie et al. 2024). The current media freedom in Ethiopia can be described as one of the worst scenarios in the Ethiopian media history (Moges 2024).

Not only in less or non-democratic countries like Ethiopia but also political journalists play a central but contested role in democracy (Van Dalen and Van Aelst 2020). Hanitzsch and colleagues (2020) and Singer (2007) refer to this as 'contested autonomy' or 'professional autonomy dilemmas' (Waisbord 2013). Because of its strong ties to the ruling party or government, the state media is heavily criticized regarding professionalism. In this context, the socio-demographic and ideological profile is a recurrent component of comprehensive studies on political journalists (Van Dalen and Van Aelst 2020). As it has been noted by Hanitzsch (2009) and Weaver (1998), journalistic cultures vary among nations. This article is intended to contextualize the exposures that individual journalists have to professionalism and their backgrounds, particularly at Ethiopia's AMC. However, journalists across all media platforms, genres and forms espouse the journalism ideology (Deuze 2005). Depending on the measurements employed, one might think that journalists worldwide are becoming more alike in their professional practices or otherwise (Weaver and Willnat 2012).

Previous research works were done at AMC at various points in time. Among these, Mekonnen (2022) and Kebede et al. (2022, 2023, 2024) carried out organizational examinations of AMC, one of which includes individual-level analysis. Nonetheless, as it is the most fundamental component of HIM analysis and is influenced by all levels, comprehensive individual-level analysis standpoint has to be given due considerations which might have significant implications for Ethiopian journalism practice-social and sociological values this depicts. Consequently, this article explores journalists' professional journalism practice in line with their individual disclosures and professional dilemmas they face in AMC.

Theoretical orientations

The individual-level analysis of HIM, which is the prominent media psychology model, encompasses five levels (Reese and Shoemaker 2014, 2016), and ideological branding, also known as level of branding (Kedem and Neiger 2024), are integrated in this study to examine journalists' working perceived realities.

Individual-level analysis

The individual level refers to the personal and professional backgrounds and orientations of journalists, as well as their specific roles and occupational characteristics within the news organization (Hanitzsch et al. 2020). Individual-level analysis is adapted as a theoretical foundation to provide a richer understanding of journalists' working perspectives and experiences in Ethiopia. Journalists are the central players of any media organization's journalistic products. The actual practice that how journalists report and what to report is influenced by many factors – an individual-level influence is only a jigsaw for other level influences in an organization (Dirbaba 2006). Individual-level analysis is the most micro level or inner part of HIM that incorporates the characteristics of the individual communicator (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). This signifies the other four levels (social system, social organization, organizational and routine practices) have seemingly exerted influences on this level.

The attitudes, training and background of the journalist (or media worker more generally) are influential factors to produce content. Individual journalists in the media organizations are exposed to tendency of favour to their personal aspects and to the media organizations' power of ownership (Reese 2001; Reese and Shoemaker 2014, 2016). The personal bias of an individual journalist may be relevant to reporting, but journalists of a particular leaning often self-select into organizations because of their pre-existing policies, history and organizational culture (Reese 2007). In effect, Reese (2001) claims whether political or academic, power to shape news is held by the individual journalist and journalist studies attribute great importance to individual characteristics in shaping the news product.

Individual level of analysis considers the relative autonomy of individuals, how they are shaped by, contribute to, and identity with their surrounding organizations (Reese and Shoemaker 2016). The idea of professionalism can be considered an individual-level value that journalists espouse and an occupational calling to which they belong. To summarize, according to Reese and Shoemaker (2016), journalists make decisions based on psychological-level attributes, but they operate within a web of constraints organizations, and individual level of analysis considers the relative autonomy of individuals, how they are shaped by, contribute to, and identity with their surrounding organizations.

Individual level of branding

The level of branding/ideological branding can serve as a bridge that unites and connects the personal and professional levels; it is integrated as a theoretical framework for exploring the ideological, political, social, economic and religious opinions of journalists as well as their biographies and social networks (Kedem and Neiger 2024). These scholars establish professional and personal branding, an additional level analysis that goes beyond the three levels of brand identity studies for journalists – individual, organizational and institutional. Professional ideologies are

crystallizations of particular arrays of journalism-related convictions, orientations and predispositions that articulate themselves as dominating professional culture. Hanitzsch (2007) conceptualizes these as ‘occupational ideologies’.

Journalists manage their jobs in a highly polarized political environment during regular elections and ongoing conflicts, including religious, ethnic, cultural and political disputes, while frequently expressing personal ideological opinions. Kedem and Neiger (2024) scrutinize how journalists convey their views on politics through their branding and role-playing and discuss why journalism is evolving into a polarized, individualized and ideologically driven medium where established norms are flexible. In context, the integration of level of branding and individual-level analyses would enhance to explore journalists as individuals to various disclosures of personal history and professionalism across the media culture of the Global South.

Method

Philosophically, this article used pragmatism. The journalistic ideals, working experiences and perspectives of journalists were investigated using a qualitative study methodology. This approach enriches the comprehensive conceptualization of journalists’ lived experiences. AMC was used as a demonstration for illustrating how individual journalist disclosures occur in the context of Ethiopian media. The corresponding regional councils and the Federal House of People’s Representatives are the governing bodies to whom all regional and federal media outlets are responsible for. As a result, using AMC as a showcase could enable generalizations regarding the media practices of individual journalists. In-depth interviews and document analysis were the salient data collection tools employed to accomplish the stated objectives.

In-depth interview

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of journalists’ insights and experiences about their journalism practices, individual disclosures and the ethical challenges they encountered, in-depth interviews were carried out. Participants were able to discuss the reality discursively as a result. Accordingly, the three-interview series which Seidman (2006) describes as focused on life history, experience particulars and meaning reflection was utilized to appropriately engage the selected journalists. This was due to the impact that journalism practices had on the real workplace and the hierarchical influences that emanated from the experiences that those professionals have had.

From five to fifty participants is adequate, according to Dworkin (2012), who offers a compilation of justifications and a more thorough evaluation. As a result, twelve journalists who had been purposely chosen to participate in the in-depth interview were taped for about eleven hours, in total, to navigate individual journalist’s working exposures. The interviews were recorded between July 2023 and January 2024. Every journalist was interviewed for over fifty-five minutes on average based on eight main open-ended leading questions. These journalists had seven and more

years of working experiences that enabled to scrutinize the media practice before and after the ‘reformed government’ of Prosperity Party (PP), in which conducting interviews with senior journalists facilitated to probe the media organization’s practices.

To put differently, the selected journalists worked in both Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime that ruled the country from 1991 to 2018 and the post-2018. The current post-2018 government initially opened up relatively better avenues and loosening of restrictions on media and independent journalism, and significant changes have been made to Ethiopia’s contemporary media landscape in 2018, but it did not last long (Kebede et al. 2022, 2023, 2024; Moges 2022, 2024). This criterion made possible journalists, who were working for all AMC branches, i.e., Bahir Dar (head office), Gondar, Debre Markos, Addis Ababa, Debre Birhan and Dessie, to share their professional experiences effectively in the late EPRDF and now PP regimes.

Document analysis

Media resources including proclamations, policy documents, media laws and procedures, working manuals and editorials, were reviewed to investigate applications and influences on individual journalists’ content production. The investigators looked into national media regulations, rules, proclamations and UNESCO documents regarding Ethiopian media such as AMC editorial policy, AMC manual, AMC Proclamation, Ethiopian Media Council (EMC), Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA) and UNESCO’s media assessment on Ethiopia. The media organization’s manuals were employed in the analysis. The purpose of this examination was to ascertain the impact these documents had on AMC’s journalism practices. Because of concerns about confidentiality, documents were solely utilized for data triangulation in the analysis and problem identification. Since all regional and national media outlets in Ethiopia are constitutionally guaranteed to be owned, operated and funded by the regional and federal governments, AMC was also directly impacted by national media regulations, policies and proclamations.

Analysing the hierarchical relationships between professional journalists, extra-media actors and media personalities in different roles was deemed crucial for understanding Ethiopian media and journalistic practices, based on the previously demonstrated data gathering tools. Further, consent was obtained ethically between the researchers and each journalist who was interviewed. In the findings, anonymous code names (J01–J12) were utilized, such as ‘J’ to denote ‘journalist’. To ensure the respondents felt safe exposing their identities, the researchers introduced fictitious codes or participant names in the transcription. All of the interviews were audio recorded, transcribed into appropriate languages from Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, to English and then subjected to a continuous qualitative coding procedure. To this end, the data analysis was carried out following a series of procedural processes, including audio recording, transcription, translation, coding, categorization, re-coding and re-categorization; main themes emerged from the interview data.

Findings and discussion

This section of the article covers journalists' perspectives based on the in-depth interview questions forwarded in line with media documents. Journalists' backgrounds, professional dilemmas encountered and political stances are the major themes emerged.

Uncovering journalists' personal backgrounds and influences on journalism practice

As humans, journalists have their own personal backgrounds that are reflected during their journalism practice. Emphasis is placed mostly on journalists' attitudes, values and beliefs, education and training and professional experiences. Journalists' upbringing, in family/community, has influences on their journalism practice both positively and negatively.

In a positive perspective, a ten-year experienced journalist asserted that 'we [journalists] live with the community; it is huge to be influenced by the community, but I do not think this makes me enormous influences because I prioritize for the profession' (J01, July 2023). The other interviewee claimed 'we [journalists] live like the community, doing what makes the community happy, and sharing their sadness as well. If the community says "you are wrong", I have to accept the norm; I do not have a deviant character' (J12, January 2024). These excerpts demonstrate how journalists' upbringing in their respective communities and families has an impact on how they practice journalism professionally at AMC. These experiences show how journalists are practising journalism within the web of locally upbringing relationships. This finding concurs with Weaver and Willnat's (2012) assessment that plenty of journalists seem to be more influenced by social influences, include cultural and political system disparities, than by media organizations, journalism education and professional norms. Further, other informant described as 'personally, I have not stopped to think about whether I have acquired the profession's character or not yet. The cause is my upbringing, background, and community factors have had on me' (J09, December 2023). It is learned that family or community background influence are substantial on journalists' professional career.

In a negative aspect, an experienced reporter from Amhara Television (ATV) said that he is negatively influenced by his upbringing in the family. He thinks that his family makes him to grow up like that and has impacts on his professional career as:

personal characteristics may be inherited from family, and it is an obstacle for practising journalism. As an individual, the challenges I encounter are being not brave enough and shy; I think that being shy creates a defective hole for my profession.

(J07, November 2023)

His communication with different people (which is much needed for a journalist) is not satisfactory. This shows how the family/community of each journalist affects his or her professional career in the actual journalistic practice arena. A reporter from (ATV) believes that his family background and positive educational attachment towards journalism makes this journalist a proud and responsible journalist. His disciplined upbringing in the family and willingly chooses and attends journalism education, as he thinks, enables him a parallel motives being a professional journalist.

My professional and personal characteristics are similar. For this, my upbringing plays an important role. My family raised me in a morally clean way. I think I grew up understanding many things. I have loved, respected, and cherished the profession since I was a child. But for the most part, I have seen personal characteristics as helpful to my work.

(J03, September 2023)

In line with education opportunities to journalists, two things could be mesmerized. The first thing is scholarship opportunities have been given to journalists to upgrade their academic and professional status in higher education institutions. That is the case that 'most journalists in AMC have MA Degrees' (J05, October 2023). In effect, they get appropriate salary increment and various incentive opportunities. This is considered by journalists as a good move by the media organization. Apparently, giving a journalist a scholarship and training opportunities could be highly significant to their professional development. In a global survey, however, it is less typical for journalists to be graduates of journalism programmes in college. Of the 25 nations only 42.5 per cent graduated (Weaver and Willnat 2012). The second thing, however, complaints are raised regarding to the privately upgraded journalists as a senior radio journalist said as:

The media organization is highly commended for awarding scholarships. Coincidentally, it was the media that taught me my MA Degree. But those who are self-taught will not get this opportunity; no matter in what profession you do your MA Degree, you will never get a promotion.

(J01, July 2023)

It is presumed that professional development is the imminent catalyst to equip journalists in their actual journalism practice competitively. This result is consistent with Dirbaba's (2006) findings that Ethiopian journalists placed a higher value on journalism education and expressed a strong interest in the significance of accrediting journalism courses and granting licences to professionals in the field. Regarding Ethiopian scenario, the majority of journalists (48.9 per cent) studied journalism and communication as their field of study (Kebede 2023). As of 2019, more than twenty universities in the country were offering journalism and communication either as a field of study or as a course; many practising journalists are graduates of these universities (UNESCO 2022). However, some journalists complain organizational

working achievements and awards sometimes do not guarantee a journalist upgrade his/her rank. The privately upgraded journalists would not get status like the sponsored upgraded journalists of which it is taken as wrong by journalists. For instance, a reporter from ATV told that 'a five-time award-winner for his performance at the organization is still a reporter; he could not even be an editor' (J06, October 2023). Situations of this nature have a significant impact on a journalist's devotion and professional ethics.

The professional background of journalists has connections to their current professional practice when considering their academic qualifications as personal attributes. For example, a senior informant communicated 'I joined social science targeting to study journalism and communications although I was good at natural science subjects. Then I studied this field in a university and now I am practicing it with love' (J07, November 2023). This illustrates the strong emotional bond that this journalist has grown over the years. Ethiopian journalists perceived the value of journalism education differently from their western counterparts (Dirbaba 2006). This facilitates for him to perform journalism professionally at AMC.

The other journalist who studied journalism willingly stated 'by working in challenging environments such as over mountains, deserts, and in less accessible areas, I am loyal to journalism and I think and believe that I am serving the community without regard to localized and religious differences' (J03, September 2023). This evidence shows the journalist considers himself as loyal to the profession even within uncomfortable circumstances. These extracts reveal the commitment and loyalty journalists devote to the profession is significantly strong in AMC. Further, regarding journalists' professionalism, a senior ATV reporter claimed as 'I am careful not to let my thoughts be treated in my journalistic works' (J04, September 2023). This speaks to professional over personal perceptions of things.

Professional dilemmas

According to the experiences of journalists at AMC, there are professional ambiguities relating to concerns of diversity, ethnicity and religion. Though diversity, ethnicity and religion do not significantly impede journalists' ability to do their jobs in AMC, principally there are professional clashes or competing interests during their reporting. The contentious topic among professional journalists is the impact of religion on professional reporting. To put differently, the way journalists cover religion by the secular state media of AMC raises questions. This is because etymologically journalism is secular (Christensen 2020).

In the one hand, journalists thought that their private religious teachings enable them to practice journalism accordingly. A senior radio journalist who adhered to Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Christianity stated that 'in my reporting, I have never been accused of bias because my religion teaches me not to be biased; I believe that the God will ask me one day' (J11, January 2024). This excerpt shows how religion might influence, how objective reports are written, and the disciplines of the religions'

influence on the professional works. This result is consistent with Hanitzsch et al. (2020), who stated that journalists worldwide seem to place equal value on impartiality, accurate information and reliability over personal views as a basis for reporting. Weaver and Willnat (2012) also noted that the only practice that appears to be almost universally recognized is keeping news sources anonymous when they have been promised confidentiality. Hence adhering to the profession without having any religious attachments is one example of journalism ethics and disciplines.

In a stark contrast, the way religious issues are covered brings ethical questions. On religious reporting, a Muslim reporter expressed his lived experience as ‘religious celebrations should receive media coverage neutrally and objectively as part of community ritual’ (J08, November 2023). Principally, regardless of the religion that journalists cover and adhere to, media users/consumers do not label journalists in their content production. Depending on the particular situational context, journalists should base their moral judgements on ‘universal ethical rules’ or moral absolutes (Hanitzsch 2007; Hanitzsch et al. 2020). Despite the fact that reporting on religious matters was proper, this reporter did not feel particularly motivated to do so. The reporter explained his views as follows:

There is no such thing as total neutrality. However, the audience you are catering to should not know if you are catering to Muslims or Christians. I am not interested in covering religious-related journalistic items unless I am forced to. In my experience, I do not want to report and do either Christian or Muslim celebrations. If there is a necessity to cover them, I prefer to do Christian festivals to avoid possible labeling though I am a devout Muslim.

(J02, July 2023)

The professional dilemma comes here according to the above senior ATV journalist experiences. This journalist noticed some reporters’ efforts and propensity to unwittingly participate in religious festivals-present a problem for their professional credibility. In connection, Kedem and Neiger (2024: 2186) affirm journalists strategically employ reputation management techniques to establish and cultivate their personal brand, promote their news organizations and uphold the integrity of their profession. In order to be fair and accurate for journalists who cover religious stories, Chaffee (2020) suggests if you are making up stories, call it fiction. These journalists (those who report their religion festivals) do not provide unbiased news and utilize language that appeared to support their own religion. In this regard, Moges and Skjerdal (2024) find stories are frequently skewed towards the political and ethnic perspectives of the journalist. This type of journalistic participation may be susceptible to losing the audience’s trust, which could create a murky professional problem for journalists and the image of the media organizations. Moreover, a journalist disclosed that:

My coworkers unintentionally and unprofessionally report on religious matters. I do not want to in any way jeopardize my journalistic integrity. When I, as

a reporter, wish our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ a happy Birthday or wish all of the adherents of the Islamic faith a happy Eid, it is one example of engagement.

(J06, October 2023)

This implies journalists should always maintain their objectivity, regardless of their personal religious beliefs. In this respect, Chaffee (2020) asserts instead of balancing the news, the well-intended pursuit of *balanced reporting* can go awry and distort it, and the majority of journalists concur that their professional roles include accurately and objectively reporting, promptly disseminating information to the public and offering analyses of current affairs and topics (Weaver and Willnat 2012). They are required to follow the professional standards and guidelines established by the media organization. Confined to this, Moges and Skjerdal (2024) reported the (state) media seem ambivalent between reporting on religious issues and adopting a peculiar interpretation of 'secular' principles that ignores religion. As a way out, the professional journalist's sole decision is to put aside all personal biases, allegiances and presumptions in order to document the unadulterated facts as clearly and accurately as possible (Chaffee 2020).

The other dimension of the professional dilemma is the ethnification of media ownership or the ethnic-based regional delineation. Ethnic media organizations receive an enormous attention in Ethiopia in terms of ownership and operation (Skjerdal and Moges 2021; Moges and Skjerdal 2024; Behailu 2022, Dessie et al. 2023; Zeyede et al. 2024). In this sense, the language usages during reporting did not seem neutral. Kedem and Neiger (2024) support that perception of professional journalistic norms manifest in varying degrees of inclusion or exclusion of ideological content in their self-branding. Sometimes journalists involve themselves in the reporting, like the following extract. 'The journalist reports in AMC as "in our region". He has to report "in Amhara region" as independently. Therefore, a person from X region does not think that this media organization is mine and reports the truth' (J04, September 2023).

Such type of things create professional dilemma in journalism practice. The media organization's reputation to other societies out of ANRS has a quest of belongingness. Explicitly, AMC's working documents dictate the goal of the media organization is to provide the Amhara region's people with sufficient information about development, technology, social, political and cultural capabilities in order to empower them and transform them substantially (AMC manual 2011; AMC editorial policy 2011; AMC proclamation 2021). An informant asserted 'AMC is required to represent the Amhara people; it is wanted to be a media that represents the people of Amhara' (J05, October 2023). This perception clashes with the very essence of media organization's responsibility and integrity.

The following arguments from different journalists' perspectives, ethnicity and media are collided, elaborate the dilemma understandably. This incident involves a mass murder that is ethnically motivated. This agrees with Zeyede et al. (2024) that

the historical assertions, political narratives and media manipulation of ethnically affiliated media in service of actors' objectives, which result in ethnic identity-based violence and cause civilian casualties. So how might a journalist who is independent and a member of the victims' ethnicity cover this story? Usually, this scenario produces more feelings and emotions than rationality. The excerpt that follows exemplifies this professional dilemma as:

When Amharas in Benishangul Gumuz region were slaughtered and buried in the same grave with a grader, I felt emotional during a radio live program. Our leaders came the next day in the morning's editorial meeting and said to me 'you were emotional, deviated from the media ethics, presented it exaggeratedly, were very biased, and capitalized Amhara very much'. But I do not believe in by the critics. If possible, it is better to cry there. There is nothing worse than this that can happen in this world.

(J07, November 2023)

This journalist is quite emotional about the ethnically based killings and massacres in Wollega (Oromia Region), Metekel (Benishangul-Gumuz Region) and Ataye (Amhara Region) areas that happened many times, and the cases have worsened in the recent years. Similarly, Wassie et al. (2024) report Ethiopia's identity-driven politics or ethnocentric state formation is the main cause of the current political backlash in many regions. People killed by ethnically motivated intentions. The country is dealing with a vicious cycle of war, internal conflict, ethnic conflict, killings and lack of stability that causes many people to displace (Moges 2024). As part of that society and professional journalists, this type of incident usually erodes journalistic values and balance. Consequently, the professional ideals of journalism transform into a kind of social value (Vos 2019). But as humans, feelings and emotions would be imminent like the above journalist's scenario. Confined with this result, Moges (2021) reveals most journalists face a difficult decision when covering significant conflict instances between upholding the public's right to know and the government's interest. In addition, the journalists are highly pressurized by the government and other actors who have ardent interest in controlling media to propagate their agenda and in silencing the critical voices (Moges 2024). When covering sensitive topics such as politics, ethnicity and religion independently, Ethiopian journalists face strict censorship, surveillance and imprisonment. EMC code of ethics dictates that 'news reports or commentaries should not be written or distributed in a manner that inflames emotions, exacerbates tensions or highlights strained relations between the communities concerned' (EMC 2023/11.2).

Journalists are prompted by this kind of exposure to explore the tension between professionalism and humanity. This is referred to as 'human touch in journalism' like approachability, empathy and affective communication skills (Mellado and Gajardo 2024). Hanitzsch (2007) supports a more abstract and humanocentric strategy is needed for non-western cultures since moral values are inevitably culture-bound and far too specific to serve as a common denominator of the global variations

in professional practice. The main journalistic tenets of objectivity and neutrality are generally true, however, situations like the one described above may give rise to professional delusion. Hanitzsch (2007) contends idealism — the results in the solutions to ethical dilemmas — is applied to such circumstances. Subsequently, this professional dilemma tests the journalism integrity of journalists.

However, other informants claim that covering ethnic violence should be done curiously. A journalist explained the reason as ‘the influence on the life of Amharas outside the region will be extremely in danger if AMC only considers the Amhara people in the Amhara region’ (J09, December 2023). This excerpt demonstrates how difficult it is to deal with the issue of racial and identity attacks. This finding is consistent with Hanitzsch et al. (2020), who found under some circumstances, many journalists would even justify harming other individuals if the outcome served the larger welfare of society. As a result, journalists are obliged to choose between their personal feelings about publicly reporting on the killings of the Amhara people and the consequences associated with doing so.

This has to do with idealism, which emphasizes the significance of (anticipated) consequences in the way journalists analyse ethical dilemmas (Hanitzsch 2007; Hanitzsch et al. 2020). Some journalists claimed that they have to abide by the professional ethics of journalism during situational happenings. This does not necessarily mean that they do not feel about things happen as humans. The humanistic attitudes are inside them, but they have to control it and let the information and evidence speak for themselves in which it is shared by many interviewed journalists.

The story that comes out when you do an investigative program will make you emotional by itself. But whether you are emotional or not, you have accountability. It is the information and evidence that I have gathered makes the truth, not my personal feelings. I do not deal with my feelings.

(J03, September 2023)

Journalists have to deal with their emotions and perceptions when reporting, but professionalism should triumph over these subjective viewpoints. The information gathered has to speak the reality than personal opinions. This finding aligns with Hanitzsch’s (2007) concept of relativism, which examines how much people rely their personal moral convictions on universal ethical principles. Though it would be challenging of being purely objective, personal subjects have not been on the table during content production in the professional journalism. This calls for the implementation of what Hall (1974) suggests *professional retreatism* – journalists disassociate themselves from any content they produce, even when it is problematic, but Haq (2024) argues limiting journalists’ ability to value and act upon their own moral and ethical judgements might have counter-productive effects. This generalizes journalists have a professional responsibility not to entertain their personal views during reporting. On the other contour, a reporter from ATV stressed that he is much influenced by making news sensational by default, but does not intentionally include and

exclude issues in his coverage. He accustoms it unnoticed due to the passion he has towards journalism profession.

Sometimes, I am kind and sincere to people. These traits can go unnoticed when I see something very serious reporting sensationally. There is a principle of neutrality in what the profession requires, and in both cases there is a certain degree of influence. As humans, I think this is what anyone will face. I do not remember saying I did this report at an angle I did not want. I have no recollection that I made reporting out of purpose.

(J08, November 2023)

The journalist is aware that sensationalizing news is not a sign of the professional character. However, he misses it while reporting, and he does struggle to steer clear of that way of reporting though. Regarding to this, Hanitzsch et al. (2020) recommend journalists have to possess greater autonomy in resolving ethical dilemmas. It is more beneficial to point our attention to how journalists respond to ethical problems rather than focusing on the distinctive content of ethical values in journalism (Hanitzsch 2007). It would be advantageous for Ethiopian media organizations as well as individual journalists to improve and facilitate capacity building trainings on certain practical ethical concerns pertaining to journalism.

Political stance

The proclamation (2021) clearly dictates journalists should not be a member of any political party. This means becoming a political party member is prohibited as a journalist. The document extends that if a journalist finds a member of a political party, he or she may be fired from the post. The new proclamation explained that:

any journalist or technician working in the corporation was forbidden to be a member of a political organization, to participate in political activities, to reflect his own political views in his work or to advance his personal position in any other way.

(AMC proclamation 2021)

A journalist could be ideologically affiliated with a political party's objectives and goals, but he or she should not be a registered member of any political party; if he or she wants to be, he or she has to leave the job as a journalist in AMC. Despite the fact that journalists are not allowed to join or be members of any political parties within the media organization, it does not seem endured practically. Related to this, journalistic roles are not static but are continuously negotiated and redefined in response to internal and external pressures (Mellado and Hallin 2024).

In this regard, a key informant stated that 'a journalist may have a political opinion, but it cannot be reflected in the media organization' (J04, September 2023).

It is widely believed that these journalists implicitly support political parties like the PP, Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (ECSJ) and the National Movement of Amhara (NaMA) in their journalism profession endeavours. The excerpt follows demonstrates the degree of administration's and journalists' covert backing that 'I do not think there is an ideology that does not exist in our organization. You may see some reports in different forms even if not visibly, and find reports in the form of PP, ECSJ or NaMA' (J11, January 2024). This has the possibility of leading the media organization to play hide-and-seek intra-organizationally because journalists raised their freedom of speech in that sense. Political journalists traditionally represented the interests of the political parties with which they were affiliated (Van Dalen and Van Aelst 2020). It is actually believed that ideological validity might be higher than its identity membership.

In administrative perspectives, however, some journalists approach administrative issues in aggressive and violent ways, according to a senior journalist. The following paragraph from a key admin staff enforces it.

There are journalists who have very extreme attitudes, but we have tolerated them. They are not threatened or warned. In their own way, they had an expression that did not show respect, which seemed to undermine the media leadership in a way that caused violence and hostility. As media leaders, we have managed all this because we are young professionals. I believe we have achieved what is impossible for our country's political culture.

(J10, December 2023)

This excerpt demonstrates how journalists are treated by media management in order to maximize their contribution to the media and society. They put up with journalists who violate or disobey the media organization's editorial policy, rules and regulations. The presence of young media practitioner in AMC provides a chance to comprehend and interact with the sensitive journalists. For example, an admin in AMC told 'I think our media is tolerating those who reflect their political views' (J09, December 2023). This does not imply that those hostile journalists will not face repercussions for their mistakes, but rather that it is more crucial to rectify them than to fire them. In this regard, Kebede et al. (2024) report contemporarily, journalists seem to exhibit frustration, vulnerability and persistent political pressure in their journalism job in Ethiopia.

Most journalists in AMC do not want to be involved in political routines for good. They strongly believe not being a member of political party is one manifestation of neutrality, objectivity and unbiased work of journalism. Coming back, the implementation of the proclamation triggers some debate among journalists, though. The majority of journalists accepted the decree positively, but with some potential confusion. The following extract was taken from the well-experienced journalist who worked on Amhara Radio, Bekur Newspaper and Online media monitoring.

The new proclamation states it is not possible to be a party member. But the manager and deputy managers are members of APP. As a result, the bylaw was violated. This is one of the basic reasons for journalists' freedom of expression is under question that made me quit my job.

(J02, July 2023)

Journalists are not allowed to be members of any political party and write on social media platforms; almost all interviewed journalists agree on that. In practice, the manager of AMC is the elected member of Amhara Prosperity Party. However, when it comes to journalists, it is totally prohibited. In this connection, Vos (2019) asserts politicians intimidate journalists, cast doubt on the credibility of journalism and impose regulations on their work that erodes journalism's autonomy. But a journalist claimed 'there are party members who are also journalists' (J10, December 2023). Kebede et al. (2024) characterized such journalists as 'mission deliverers'. This shows the extent of the political affiliation entertained in AMC and significantly influences journalistic work.

Beyond organizational goals, the ownership is arguably the key factor in determining AMC's overall effectiveness, journalistic working approaches and practices. This result is supported by Kebede (2023) that political objectives predominate in all AMC hierarchies, compromising the standards of professional journalism practices. This media organization is responsible to the council of ANSR administration (AMC proclamation 2021). A senior radio journalist stated 'even if a candidate comes up with a better idea, he/she may not be selected as long as he/she is not a member of the ruling political party' (J12, January 2024). The political affiliation is the most important factor in the higher positional placements. The partisan nature of state media organizations in Ethiopia makes journalists not being critical reporters both professionally and ethically.

Conclusions and practical implications

This article integrates a diversity of sociological, educational and professional approaches to map journalists' working environment considering a state media in Ethiopia. The majority of journalists claim that their personality traits have significant impacts on how they practise and produce professional journalism and content ethically and morally. The coverage of religious festivities and ethnic-based attacks provokes disagreements in journalists' professional endeavours. These resulted in journalists engage themselves during reporting by aligning themselves with some groups (ethnicity) or locality identification. This norm of reporting erodes journalism and the media organization in paramount angles.

It is visible that ethnification is a notable trend in the Ethiopian media environment and potentially affects journalistic integrity. Both favourably and unfavourably, the way journalists grow up in the family/community influence their respective working environment. Journalists highlight the importance of educational advancement (scholarship chances) for their professional careers in journalism.

This study practically implicates when journalists receive the proper credit and get well-deserved job assignments from the media organization, their professional careers are typically fruitful. More importantly, journalists' working conditions in the Ethiopian state-owned media organizations are exposed to various ethical dilemmas ultimately influence professional journalistic practices. These perspectives are, dominantly, originated from journalists' personal backgrounds, ethnic orientations/contestations and religious affiliations. To this end, EMA, as the statutory media regulatory body, should come up with compressive practical guidelines that could work for all media organizations possibly to alleviate journalists' confusions and discomforts in their professional journalistic content productions.

Ethical statement

This article was researched and written to the standards of Intellect's Ethical Guidelines: <https://www.intellectbooks.com/ethical-guidelines>. No approvals or subject consent were required.

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