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"Digital Woyane" – Fighting the Digital Revolution

Political Activists, the Use of Social Media and the Construction of Nationalist Sentiments in Tigray, Ethiopia

Mirjam Zehnder

MSc in Media and Communication Studies

Supervisor: Tobias Linné

Lund University

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Abstract

In recent years, digital technologies provided new affordances for movement leaders as communication strategies in political protests in order to advance democratisation processes, especially in less developed countries. In Ethiopia, numerous protests have been taken place lately, which were mainly organised along ethnic lines on the basis of nationalist sentiments. Political activists in Tigray, the northernmost region of the country, are opposing the idea of a politically unified Ethiopia and aim to protect their own cultures and traditions by participating in political discussions through social media. Online platforms have become their most important tools to express themselves, also because the traditional media is largely controlled by governmental institutions.

This thesis aims to investigate social media practices and engagement of activists in political discourses and protest movements in order to understand the role of digital technologies in connection to recent democratisation processes in Tigray. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews with Tigrayan activists were conducted in order to examine new opportunities given by new media in their everyday political participation, and how, through digital media, nationalist feelings are constructed and articulated. This paper argues that, despite government restrictions such as censorship and internet shutdowns as well as the low internet penetration in the country, social media is of big value for the activists in spreading their messages and building on the nation of Tigray. In the discussion about the influence of the activists on the Tigrayan society, the interplay between online and offline spaces becomes central in that the social way people live together supports the distribution of online news in the offline world. Overall, this thesis contributes to the field of African media studies and the need to re-conceptualise theories and concepts by recognising cultural and political circumstances which differ from a Western understanding of doing media research.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Tigray, Social Media Activism, Political Participation, Political Protests, Nationalism, Ethnicity, African Media Studies

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1. Introduction

With the rise of digital technologies, people all over the world have found new ways of communication to express themselves, propagate their ideas and mobilise masses for their own purpose, such as in political protests. In the last decade, new media has gotten a lot of attention as a consequence of emerging anti-government protests, taken the example of the Arab Spring in 2011, where hundreds of thousands of people were mobilised over digital media to participate in mass demonstrations (c.f. Khondker 2011, Tufekci & Wilson 2012, Tudoroiu 2014). Social media, as new affordances for communication strategies in protest movements have caused debates about their value for political participation and about how they can be utilised in ongoing democratisation processes, especially in less developed countries.

Ethiopia, in its history, has seen much political unrest up to the present day, including the dissolving of an empire, the fall of a communist military regime, and the establishment of a federalist democracy which has only been a partial success so far. Protests and demonstrations have not been uncommon, especially in the last few years. Related to this it has become routine to incorporate digital technologies in the attempt to take part in decision-making processes on a governmental level by citizens outside of political elite circles (Dugo 2017). Social media, as in the rest of the world, has enabled a whole new form of communication and interaction between people. This has also created effects on political spheres that are being enlarged by the fact that the area opened up for an increasing number of actors who are positioned "outside of the realm of institutionalized politics" (Carpentier 2011: 39).

Few research in the country on this issue has so far mainly provided insights in the use of digital media in actual protest movements outside of virtual spaces during or after they actually took place. A study about protests in the region of Oromia from 2014-2017 has illustrated that there is a demand for alternative platforms such as social media due to the controlled and censored traditional media (Dugo 2017). The present case study is placed within a context where this political activism is mainly confined to online spaces so far, without any clear signs of the emergence of physical protests.

With this thesis, I strive to investigate social media practices and engagement of activists in political discourses and protest movements in order to understand the role of digital technologies in connection to recent democratisation processes in Ethiopia. The country is home to more than 80 different ethnic groups with their own traditions, cultures and languages,

a fact that is important to consider for it has been one of the major reasons for the emergence of protests and why citizens are not satisfied with the political situation. The question of which ethnicity should lead the country, and how, and if all nationalities are treated equally has been pulling apart the Ethiopian unity, and many turmoils have been driven by these nationalist sentiments, as it happened for example at different universities in the country where students were killed because of their origins. This special constellation has implications for the understanding of how and for what purpose social media is used, and how and why protest leaders such as activists manage to build a solid online network where they can spread their messages. Creating a "we-feeling", or in other words, a collective identity, is essential for protest movements to successfully mobilize people (Gerbaudo & Treré 2015: 870), and in the case of Ethiopia, collective identity building is strongly based on this ethnic thinking.

In order to focus, amongst other aspects, on these ethnic sentiments, this case study centres around social media and political participation in one specific region of Ethiopia. Interviews with political activists, or bloggers, as they usually call themselves, from Tigray, one out of nine and the most Northern region in the country, have been conducted. They are mainly using Facebook and Twitter to spread their mostly anti-governmental opinions and beliefs in order to strengthen the regional culture and traditions. The strict media policy in Ethiopia often hinders individuals to participate in political discussions through the traditional media, which is why digital platforms have gained a growing influence in recent years.

One rather big issue of online political participation in Ethiopia, and therefore the question if these bloggers are actually heard or not, is that the whole region is facing very low Internet penetration compared to the rest of the word. Only around 18% of the population are using the Internet regularly, and around six million users are active on Facebook, out of over 110 million citizens (Internet World Stats 2019)[1]. In addition to the lack of access, media in authoritarian contexts such as the Ethiopian one repeatedly underlie within strict state control and restrictions. Digital platforms have encountered similar measures, which makes it to a sensitive issue in that the activists can be held responsible by authorities for what they post. Yet still, and based on other examples from other places in the world, online platforms are seen as meaningful insofar as a variety of new information becomes accessible and people can raise their voices in censorship dominated areas. In short, "digital media are transforming our lives" (Ayalew 2019:

[1] To compare: in Sweden, around 96% of the population are regular active internet users (Internet World Stats 2019).

209), which points to the factor that online activities can have direct impacts on offline spaces and people's everyday lives.

Based on these reflections, and considering the particular context in Ethiopia with many different nationalities, this research aims to answer the following questions:

a) How do social media give political activists new opportunities to participate in political discussions in the region of Tigray in Ethiopia?
b) In what way do political activists use online platforms to construct and articulate nationalist sentiments?
c) How do social media activists see the potential of social media having an impact on the Ethiopian society?

By having a broader view on the significance of the research, the case of political activists in Tigray and their engagement in social media are placed in ongoing discussions about the influence and relevance of digital technologies in political protest movements. The topic is worth studying insofar as it can add to the understanding of the value of online platforms in a complicated political context where many different interests and beliefs are colliding. In this regard, the study can directly shed lights on the views and opinions of the involved activists to get an insight into their practices and strategies. In addition, this case can give us further comprehension about the field of African media studies by considering media research under the specific cultural circumstances of the continent. Willems and Mano (2017: 2) argue that there exists the prerequisite to "foreground the voices and experiences of Africans with a range of media forms more strongly, while acknowledging the constraints to their agency impost by the state and/or the market". This implies the existence of other conditions regarding participation through media as well as media consumption due to government restrictions or lack of access.

Before going fully into the study and for the purpose of getting an understanding of the context, I attempt to give an overview about the political situation in Ethiopia and I will illustrate why the existence of the notion of ethnicity and nationalism has been at a rising stack in the last 50 years.

Background – Digital Media and the Political Context of Ethiopia

The digital media landscape in Ethiopia is a work in progress, one can say. As previously stated, Ethiopia has one of the lowest Internet and smartphone penetration in the world, even within Africa (Dugo 2017: 52). What is more, Ethiopia has "a chocking state monopoly of telecommunications" (ibid.) which gives the state the power to control the internet to a certain extent by temporally blocking specific platforms like Facebook. Furthermore, enforcing complete Internet shutdowns in order to withhold unfavourable information from the population has not been unusual in the last few years (Mbah 2019). This lack of access to the digital media sphere with the mainstream media being in total control of official authorities and existing power imbalances in the country has led to resistance and an increasing urge of people outside of the ruling elites to have their share in political discourses and actions (Carpentier 2011). Despite the measures taken by the government, protester's voices have emerged on social media, specifically on Facebook. As a result, several political movements erupted in anti-government mass protests starting in 2014 in Oromia, the biggest regional state in Ethiopia. These protests resulted in many casualties, but also had the effect that the perception of digital media has changed, since the occurring events were seen as a social media revolution in the country by various people. Ever since, the new media have been recognized as important tools for political participation in Ethiopia, even to the extent that the former Prime Minister regarded them as a major threat for the country's security because of their potential to mobilise masses which can lead to uncontrollable revolts.

"On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia" [2]

The protests were generally driven by nationalist sentiments and strong ethnic feelings, which are deeply rooted in Ethiopia's history. The country's diversity with over 80 ethnic groups caused many previous conflicts. and has always been a matter of discussion concerning which group should have the leadership of the nation-state. This ethnic consciousness had its proper awakening in student movements in the 1960's (Barnett 2020), which resulted in the fall of the Ethiopian empire in 1974. In 1991, nationalist patterns were institutionalised after nearly 20-years of dominance of the Provisional Military Government (DERG), with the establishment

[2] *On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia* is the title of an article written by a student, Wallelign Mekonnen and published in 1969 in a student magazine. He addresses the question of nationalities as one of the most fundamental issues in Ethiopia.

of the Federal State of Ethiopia, ruled by a coalition party which should equally represent the four biggest ethnic groups in the government.

However, a certain unrest never disappeared out of the political situation in Ethiopia. Anti-government sentiments continued to swirl around, also because of the fact that the late Prime Minister, since 1991, was part of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the regional party of Tigray and the smallest of all ethnic groups in the government coalition, which led to a certain mistrust that the people of Tigray are being favoured before the others (Mamdani 2019). Nationwide protests, as previously mentioned, erupted in 2014 with its peak in 2016, which forced the government to declare a national state of emergency in 2016 and 2018. Eventually, these turmoils resulted in the resignation of the then Prime Minister in February 2018, a situation that has never occurred in the regime's 27 years history before.

With the instalment of the new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018, who is part of the Oromo ethnicity, prospects of a better future found its way into Ethiopia. During this time, the country seemed to move closer together due to the promise of essential reforms of existing political structures. Initial efforts are visible, for example in that many political prisoners have been released and access to new media platforms have partially been granted. Moreover, Abiy received the Nobel Peace Prize 2019 "for his efforts to achieve peace and international cooperation, and in particular for his decisive initiative to resolve the border conflict with neighbouring Eritrea" (Nobel Prize 2019). Nevertheless, ethnic clashes in the country became prevasive more than ever since he came to power. Particularly the region of Tigray finds itself "sandwiched between antagonistic forces with little room for manoeuvre" (Gebrekiros Temare 2019). This is due to its position in the North of the country between a shared border with Eritrea, which has been unstable territory for years, and the rest of Ethiopia as its Southern neighbour whose politics is not quite in favour of Tigrayan people as it used to be. What is more, Abiy's ideas of a politically unified centralized country strives against all endeavours of Tigrayans to preserve their cultural values. As a result of this, as it happened in the past, secession voices have become louder, nowadays expressed to a big part through social media by political activists.

About this Thesis

What follows in the further process of this thesis is first a review of previous academic literature in order to place the present research within the field of African media studies, and explain relevant concepts around social media, political participation and nation-building that are central for the analysis. Subsequently, I will present methodological reflections by describing the research process and elaborate on my own standpoint of having a Western background in doing research in an African context. In addition, it is of great relevance to mention ethical reflections in the whole process, considering the sensitivity of the social media topic in Ethiopia. The main analysis of the data has generated four key points, which will be presented afterwards. Finally, in the last chapter, the results will be summarised and put back into the bigger picture of what this implies for protest movements in Ethiopia.

2. Literature Review

The purpose of the following chapter is to contextualize this thesis in the field of media studies, and to give an overview of relevant literature. It is important to conduct research about media, especially digital media, in Africa for two reasons. The growing significance of smartphones and digital technology, which naturally results in an increase of social media users due to better access (Willems & Mano 2017: 1, De Bruijn et al. 2009), is shaping society and people's everyday lives. Second, it is questionable if the existence of assumptions and stereotypes about African media and widespread application of mainly Western theories in this context hinders rather than helps our understanding of how media in Africa work. These implications will be picked up in a discussion about media research in the specific environment of the African continent. Later in the chapter, theories about the impact of digital media on political participation will be discussed, since social media increases opportunities to take part in political debates, a hunger which many African individuals and communities have (Mudhai et al. 2009: 9). The third part will be devoted to concepts, such as identity and ethnicity, and discussions about nation-building through digital technologies. It should be illustrated how existing concepts in the field can be supportive in understanding the role of social media in processes of identity forming and maintenance.

Contextualization: Media Studies from an African View

The present case study should be placed within and add to the understanding of African media research and how media and particularly social media are being viewed at and utilized by the people in their everyday lives. Media studies in Africa have for a long time been dominated by Western approaches and perspectives, without considering historical and cultural influences, which define "how viewers interpret and make use of media technologies and texts" (Mano 2009: 278). Therefore, various scholars emphasize the necessity to "de-westernize" (Nyamnjoh 2011), "decolonize" (Willems & Mano 2017) or "re-conceptualize" (Mano 2009) media theory in an African context, in order to meet the complexity of the situation. Why are these deliberations essential and how can this have an influence on the applied concepts in this research?

A lot of this "Westernization" comes from stereotypes and assumptions that people have about Africa, which also have an influence on the field of media studies. Upmost is the disregard of

African worldviews in global media discourses due to “the ideology of hierarchies and boundedness of cultures” (Nyamnjoh 2011: 19). As in many other disciplines, academic thinking in this field is “trapped” in existing hierarchies such as race or gender (ibid.: 23), which always makes the West appear superior to the rest, also in terms of dominant theories and concepts. As Nyamnjoh argues, the powerful actors do not solely decide about themselves but also define about the others (ibid.: 25). This aspect indirectly entails that research has been following this pattern, being widely accepted by the involved actors, even by African researchers. This mindset results in that the West is determining in what way media research should be done, and what is being included and what not. What is more, the African “traditional knowledge systems” (Mano 2009: 283) are often not taken seriously but are viewed as “primitive”, “useless” (ibid.), or even “criminal” (Willems & Mano 2017: 5), which enforces existing stereotypes and plays its part in the situation.

These considerations could lead to the impression that the African media landscape has to be studied in a binary opposition to a Western view on the equivalent field of research. This presumptuousness has to be left behind, because it could be “as reductive as one which views African media audiences as the passive dupes of American cultural imperialism” (Wasserman 2011: 1). It is more about modifying them in order to make them fitting to the African contexts, taking into consideration cultural and historical backgrounds and, as researchers, to be modest enough to let this context tell its own storyline (Nyamnjoh 2011: 23-24). Nyamnjoh gives the example of a dress that one buys, not to hang it in a closet but to wear it for special occasions, and therefore trying different kinds of dresses until the right one has been found, on the one hand for the occasion, but also the best fitting the person’s style and personality (ibid.: 20). What this implies and what we should not forget is the fact that one cannot homogenize the African countries to one body, which would be as if we merge the cultures of Europe to a single one. However, as Mano argues, African countries have a shared history of suffering under repression of and dominance by Western powers, which he views as enough to talk about Africa as a whole in his discussion on how to reconceptualize media studies for this setting (Mano 2009: 277). Ethiopia does not have a history of colonialization unlike most of the rest of the continent, yet it has a similar reputation in the West, being seen as a developmental country and in need for increased democratization (Tibebu 1996).

The answer to the question of how influential particularly digital media are and what possible effects they could have in Africa is, as it is also observable in Western media studies, controversial. Much research, as it seems, is concentrated on the supposedly supportive role of

the digital media landscape on democratization processes of African countries, for example a study of Agreement Jotia (2018) about *The Role of Social Media in Freeing Botswana from State Control of the Media*. Further discussions towards an increase of democratization through media are made about the possibility that new groups and organisations could emerge out of online communication to support political actions (Mudhai et al. 2009: 14). In addition, social media can "create a quantitative increase in access to information and interaction stemming from the ease and relative cheapness of communicating via new media technology" (ibid.).

In short, these discussions show that it is important not to only shed light on digital technologies and their implications of advancing democratisation processes, but also on other parts such as people's everyday lives and how they utilize new media for their own intentions. The need for examining media culture in Africa is not just a purpose itself, but can also be beneficial for developing an understanding in "how people make sense of their identity, relate to others in society, or engage with the nation-state on an everyday basis" (Willems & Mano 2017: 7). The present study about the use of social media by political activists in Tigray should add to this conversation and visualize how they interact with their communities and participate in everyday political discussions on a regional as well as national level. Ultimately, the examination of media use in an African context can tell us so much more and be encouraging to review our personal pictures we have about this continent. Therefore, it needs some reconsideration and, if necessary, an adaptation of Western concepts and theories when being applied to studies such as the present one.

New Media and Political Participation

The present research is part of a wider discussion about media and participation in the digital age, and specifically about what role media takes in the process of political participation. Different research claims differently with this issue, and many conclusions drawn about positive as well as negative effects of digital media technologies on a possible increase of participation in political discussions are formulated too general (van Djik & Hacker 2018: 59). This section will give a short overview of what is to be understood when referring to participation, and how the influence of social media is seen in theoretical considerations and previous research.

Participation and the Ordinary People: A definition

Defining the concept of participation in general is not an easy task, due to its complex interweavement in various disciplines and frameworks, which makes its meaning fluid and vague, depending on the context in which it is used (Carpentier 2011: 15, Dahlgren 2013: 18). Carpentier (2011: 10) describes participation as "a political-ideological concept" because of its interlinkage with the notion of democracy and power and the constant struggle in equalizing power positions (ibid.: 11). It seems obvious to talk about participation in connection to democracy because democratic structures are built on people's involvement in political processes, such as elections as the most basic principle of participation. In this case study, I explicitly refer to political participation, which has certain attributes in its definition. Participation in political processes is based on an "activity", which is more than just watching television or reading news. These activities are performed by people labelled as ordinary "citizens" and not by politicians, party members or Prime Ministers and Presidents. Furthermore, participation builds on voluntariness, and, obviously, deals with governments, nation-states or any other political body or institution (van Deth 2014: 351). To say it in a broader sense, political participation is "any activity of ordinary citizens with the aim of influencing the political outcomes" (Brady 1997: 737).

At this place, some clarification is needed in terms of what is understood by "ordinary citizens", which leads to Michel de Certeau and his work *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) that has a "for-forword" dedicated "to the ordinary man". He defines an ordinary individual as "a common hero, an ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the street", by which he basically refers to the entire humanity, to countless existing individuals in the social world who are moving in society by living a rather anonymous life. De Certeau's central contribution is his focus on how ordinary, or normal people master their everyday lives and how they resist and handle power structures. Thereby, he differs between the concepts of "strategies" and "tactics" by pointing out that strategies are always linked with power structures and controlling of a certain space – such as a region or country administration – whereas ordinary people make use of tactics to adapt to the environment created by strategies (1984: xix). This opposition of strategies and tactics as well as elites and ordinary people are essential for the concept of political participation, which emphasizes the ordinary in opposition to the subject position of the elite and the people in power (Carpentier 2011: 179, 182). The ordinary is a "generalised body of Others […] from the point of view of a conscious governing or administrative minority" (Williams 1981: 226).

Political Participation, the Public Sphere and Digital Technologies

Of particular interest in this research is political participation linked to digital media. Generally speaking, the web has this characteristic of empowering not only elites and experts, but also the broader public to engage because it has become accessible and easy to use for almost everybody (Dahlgren 2013: 33, 38). The concept of participation had to be reconsidered with the emergence of digital media because engagement in that sense moved from offline to online spaces, which, in general, offers new possibilities of getting involved. Furthermore, it is rather simple to acquire information due to its fast aspect, costs are lowered because it "only" needs an internet connection, and the interactive character supports contacting people in an easy manner and discussing issues with like-minded people who would not meet in offline contexts (van Dijk & Hacker 2018: 54-55).

In connection to these considerations and even though not most central to the discussion in this thesis, it is worth having a quick glance at the idea of public sphere created by Jürgen Habermas in the 1960's, which also developed with the emergence of online media. The notion of public sphere can be described as "the realm of social life where the exchange of information and views on questions of common concern can take place so that public opinion can be formed" (Dahlgren 1995: 7), in other words, a place where people have the possibility to take part in political discourses. The media have always been an important piece of the puzzle (Dahlgren 2012: 99) and through the development of the Internet the public sphere got expanded and social media platforms have now become the most important institutions within it (ibid.: 100). Through this enlargement, it became easier for people such as activists to have access and participate in the political discourse.

Carpentier (2011: 67-68) makes an important distinction between "participation *in* the media and *through* the media", defining the latter as opportunities to take part in public discourses through media but also self-representing. The first concentrates on producing content and having a share in "media organizational decision-making", which is why the idea of public sphere is more related to engaging *through* the media. Participating in the media is thereby more focused on producing content and therefore rather directed towards media professionals who have the required knowledge for this (ibid.: 68). Political activists can be related to both types of media participation, since they are producing context and at the same time use the media to make their opinions clear about politics. However, as previous research shows, it is usually more a reproduction of news (Campbell et al. 2010), something which can easily be done on social media with sharing posts from other individuals or pages, for example. Therefore, it is

also not entirely appropriate to equate political activists with the role of a classic journalist, or to use the concept of "citizen journalism" which in some way labels "the involvement of ordinary people in the media production process" (Carpentier 2011: 122). Citizen journalism refers to citizens producing news content without the participation of professionals, mostly publishing it in blogs, websites or even newspapers (Nip 2006: 218). The engagement of the Tigrayan activists, which is particularly concentrated on Facebook, seems not to solely fit into this frame.

The Role of Social Media in Political Participation – Different Understandings

One of the intentions of this research is to contribute to a better understanding of what the role of social media in political participation actually is and in what way, and if, it can help to reach a system change. A widespread perception of social media is based on the assumption that these digital technologies and the allegedly resulting increase of political participation have positive impacts on democratization processes and eliminating inequalities, for example in authoritarian regimes (van Dijk & Hacker 2018: 52). However, we should keep in mind what Malcom Gladwell (2011), in a commentary in the magazine *The New Yorker*, aptly writes:

> "Please. People protested and brought down governments before Facebook was invented. They did it before the Internet came along. Barely anyone in East Germany in the nineteen-eighties had a *phone* – and they ended up with hundreds of thousands of people in central Leipzig and brought down a regime that we all thought would last another hundred years – and in the French Revolution, the crowd in the streets spoke to one another with that strange, today largely unknown instrument known as the human voice."

His point, and many academic scholars support this argument, (c.f. Morozov 2011, Dahlgren 2013: 34, van Dijk & Hacker 2018:142), is that we should not overestimate the power of social media and it is out of place to think that technology alone can lead to system changes. After all, it is the agency of human people and not technology itself that brings governments down (Morozov 2011: 19). Digital media itself does not necessarily change power relations (Dahlgren 2013: 33), because it is a tool that can be used by activists as well as the rest of the global humanity which makes it also beneficial for governments or terrorist groups that use it to their advantages (Singer & Brooking 2018; van Dijk & Hacker 2018). Examples can be found many, such as the time of the Arab Spring in 2011, where these riots were also known under the name of "Facebook or Twitter revolutions" (van Dijk & Hacker 2018: 131). The protests were successful in that the protesters managed to make people in power positions stumble, however one cannot really speak of an improvement in these countries as it is nowadays. They went from

the Arab spring back to "winter" (ibid.: 138), because the political context in that sense did not change.

Nevertheless, digital technologies should not be ignored by research, because they have fundamentally changed the way in which people communicate with each other. Referring back to Gladwell (2011) and his comment, we can notice that he speaks about the "today largely unknown instrument known as the human voice", which indicates that he considers social media as an instrument which, in some way, replaced the nature of offline conversations and interactions. Digital media, in the case of the Arab Spring, were especially useful in three ways (van Dijk & Hacker 2018: 142). First, social media helped spreading information and news, created by people and also media companies such as Al Jazeera, content which was then shared. Second, discussions about tactics and strategies for the protests were processed on social media, and everybody was able to take part in these. Lastly, social media was used as an organization tool to mobilize protesters and direct them to the right places. Other research such as a study by Zeynep Tufekci and Christopher Wilson (2012) show a similar picture, when they state that protest movements in the Arab Spring were influenced by social media insofar as a they were part of a "new system of political communication" (377). They conclude that digitally mediated communication was actually an important piece of the protest puzzle. Another study about the utilization of online platforms in protests, which illuminates the specific context of Ethiopia by examining political protests in the region of Oromia occurring from 2014-2017, reconnects to the cases of the Arab Spring. Oromo protesters used the tool of new technologies to "[plan, coordinate and implement] protest activities across vast geographic areas" (Dugo 2017: 63), raise awareness on what is happening, and to create hashtags such as #OromoProtests, which became one of the most successful hashtags in Africa in 2016. What is more, it, not least, contributed in strengthening regional identity and unity, an important symbolic meaning during the protests (ibid.: 53).

In short, and what the discussion illustrates, is that the impact of digital media on a large scale such as an improvement of democratization processes, especially in authoritarian and development countries, is difficult and rather small. However, there has definitely occurred a change in how protest movements organise themselves and communicate with each other, due to easy accessibility and fast technologies. In addition, political participation has gotten a fundamentally different character with online media on smaller, everyday political activities. "Speaking, talking, physical action and manual action" became "typing, and clicking of

keyboards" or "downloading and uploading text, pictures or videos". (van Dijk & Hacker 2018: 193).

Digital Media and the Nation

Digital technologies do not only offer new possibilities for political participation, but also "new ways of experiencing the self […] and relating to groups in society" (Lister et al. 2009: 209). These two aspects are in strong connection to each other in Ethiopia, whose society is highly diverse, culturally and ethnically, and political participation is often related to the issue of who should govern the country in order to be able to represent all these different nationalities adequately. The intention of this section is first to briefly illustrate the concepts of identity and ethnicity, which is an important part of every individual's identification process, and later to depict the influence of online platform in creating and maintaining these by introducing the notion of online-nation building.

Identity and the Nation – An Imagined Community

Defining identity is not an easy task because of its dynamic and fluid nature, which is "constantly in the process of change and transformation" (Hall 1996: 4). One fundamental aspect is its relational characteristic, which means that we define who we are through the relations to others who are either equal, or similar, to us, or are defined through differences and exclusion (Hall 1996: 4, Wodak et al 2009: 11). This implies a construction of a "we" and a "them", or, as Hall states, the "Other". He would even go as far as arguing that construction of identity can only happen through the realization of "the relation of what it is not" (1996: 4-5), which makes this role of the "Other" essential.

The same way of arguing is applicable to the concept of ethnicity which defines a population that is based on cultural values, where communication and interaction through a distinct language happens, and which identifies itself as well as it is identified by others as such (Barth 1969: 10-11). In other words, individuals are defining themselves as belonging to a certain ethnic group and not to another based on shared meanings, origins, history and traditions. In order to maintain these strong bonds, it is of significance to constantly reconstruct and reinforce these values (Eriksen 1993: 73), a process that happens in all parts of everyday life through interaction between individuals and groups, in offline spaces but, as I will illustrate, also, more and more, through social media.

The concept of ethnicity and nationality, which is different in that it adds a more political tone to this ethnic notion (Gellner 1983: 1, Eriksen 1993: 99, Jenkins 2008: 151), can also be defined as an imagined community; imagined because an individual will never be able to know all its fellow people from the same, even most tiny nation, "yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991: 6). This interpretation of a nation by Benedict Anderson is widely accepted and further enforces this dichotomy between the "us" and "them", because humans imagine their own community, or nationality, in differentiation to other nations. In the physical world, this demarcation is usually visualised in a practical way by establishing borders between countries that mark the territory of different nations, boundaries that usually are less clear in multi-nation states like Ethiopia. Of particular interest in these countries is the concept of nationalism, an ideology, "which hold[s] that [an ethnic] group should dominate a state" (Eriksen 1993: 99). This question is one of the main motivations for political activists in Ethiopia to become involved in political discourses.

Nationalism and the Role of Digital Media – The Concept of Cybernationalism

The media has always been an important tool to strengthen and reconstruct nationalist feelings, whereas it is because of the constant use and reproduction of languages, which is an essential element of a nation, or the establishing and manifestation of cultural knowledge (Eriksen 1993: 106). Through these mechanisms, the nation as an imagined community becomes visible in new forms (Anderson 1991: 46). With the advent of the internet it becomes possible to get hold of this conception of the "imagined" in an instant, even without actually staying in the particular region of a nation (Palmer 2012: 125). Palmer argues that "the internet has such a tremendous power in augmenting and facilitating the spread of nationalism" (2012: 119), more than any other communication tool so far. He uses the term "Cybernationalism" and refers to the motivation of people to participate in virtual communities as similar to "what drives nationalist fervor" (ibid.: 117). Cybernationalism can be defined as online "activities through which nongovernmental actors utilize the Internet to promote nationalistic sentiments across the world" (Ying 2007: 1), which can also be referred to as nation-building in a digital way. Thereby, citizens, or "netizens" (ibid.), which include citizens from a respective nation and the diaspora outside of this geopolitical space, can foster their nationalist thinking and, through interaction with other individuals, make the imagined community even more visible. The involved emotions which leads to these online nation-building processes are mostly based on experiences outside of the online space.

Emmanuel Anyefru (2008) applied the concept of Cybernationalism in a study about the representation of the Anglophone community in Cameroon. He examined the role of digital technologies in the effort of the Anglophone community in the Francophone dominated country to be recognized as such, and how they used online media to reconstruct and maintain their national identity. With the help of websites, it was possible to connect "like-minded individuals" and "raise consciousness about issues that in the past were often inaccessible to the general Anglophone public" (Anyefru 2008: 273).

Pursuing these thoughts, the "we" / "them" dichotomy which is, as previously argued, so essential to an individual's identification as either being part of a nation or being excluded, has to be reinforced on digital platforms: This is necessary, since there exist no actual borders or oceans which separate one nation from the other, as we find it in spatial territories (Palmer 2012: 120). Language is of central importance, and the interactional characteristic, particularly of social media, also plays its part because it is through interaction that we relate ourselves to other people and identify the "Other" (Hall 1996: 4). The distinctiveness and uniqueness of a nationalist identity is constructed through discourse where language plays a crucial role (KhosraviNik & Zia 2014: 755, Wodak et al. 2009: 22). Majid KhosraviNik and Mahrou Zia (2014) conclude in a study about the reconstruction and representation of an Iranian nationalist identity on social media that a strong dichotomisation between "Us" as Persians and "Them" as Arabs is mainly created through language. They examined a Facebook group called "Persian Gulf", this body of water which is also known under "Arab Gulf" and represents a border zone in the Middle East. The naming triggers nationalist sentiments which are deeply rooted in the Iranian history, and participation in online discourses is used to empower the community and to fill "perceived gaps in representation" of the Iranian society (KhosraviNik & Zia 2014: 775).

In addition, as in normal offline interactions, participation in online discussions is rather simple for "ordinary" people (Iveson 2019: 305). Through these new affordances, the construction of identity and the personal affiliation to an in-group such as a nation can be reinforced online, creating symbolic borders through dialogue and therefore make visible the "us" and the "them" as well as geopolitical locations. Mandie Iveson (2019) did recent research on Catalan separatist sentiments expressed on Twitter prior to the referendum debate in October 2017 about Catalan independence from Spain and the resulting disturbances. In her work, she analyses pro and contra secession voices, and concludes that Twitter served as a platform where collective identities and "symbolic boundaries" (Iveson 2019: 305) were constructed by "virtual imagined communities" in order to eliminate the "Other", the enemy. The construction of the enemy

picture is important to identify for the purpose of mobilizing people for a cause (ibid.: 304). Secession ideas, as discussions at a later stage will show, are also negotiated on online platforms in Ethiopia by Tigrayans.

Implications for this Thesis

Questions of political participation, online media and the notion of identity are closely intertwined. There is no common agreement on how influential digital technologies are in regard to a possible increase in political participation by ordinary citizens. However, with the emergence of online platforms such as social media, the nature of communication and participation certainly has changed. Digital media brought new affordances in spreading and consuming ideas and opinions, and it has become easy to engage due to fast accessibility and low costs. In an Ethiopian context, where internet penetration and knowledge about new technologies are generally still low, these assumptions made by previous research have to be classified differently. Certain implication such as the concept of Cybernationalism must be reconsidered due to circumstances of bad accessibility to the web because the costs for mobile data are too high or because of government restrictions. Furthermore, and if access is granted, the use of social media differs to a certain extent from habits and customs. Implications such as observations of previous research about the assumption that the political utilization of the web is not of primary interest for the users (Dahlgren 2013: 34) have to be reviewed in a country like Ethiopia where the political situation is not as stable as in other environments.

This lack of an understanding of how political participation is performed through online platforms and in what way social media activists benefit from the web in an authoritarian context like Ethiopia with limited online accessibility will be explored further on. In addition, it should be taken into consideration to follow the advice of numerous scholars to not take for granted concepts and theories of media studies in an African context, but to overthink and, if necessary, redefine these.

3. Methods and Methodology

Research on media and social media is a sensitive issue in Ethiopia. The government controls most of the traditional media such as newspapers, radio and TV, and even as a private media owner there are rules which have to be followed and self-censorship which has to be applied. Someone being active on social media exposes him/her to the general public and particularly to governmental surveillance systems, which results in the essence and requirement of methodological reflections in digital media research in Ethiopia. The necessity to do so also lies within the fact that my own standpoint is a Western one, and the field of research is non-Western. Sandra Harding, from a feminist perspective, argues that Western, male dominated research usually is the reality that we draw from when doing research (2008: 5). We are certainly entitled to do so, however should we not forget the rest and instead having the focus on seeing "both Western and non-Western knowledge systems" to have a complete picture of the context of the social world that we are surrounded by in our everyday lives (ibid.: 6). The goal of this study is to expand on this non-Western standpoint by doing research about political participation and social media in an African context.

At this place a quick note about my own standpoint has to be made, since I have no choice in admitting that my position undeniably is a Western one. However, and as I try to visualise later in the chapter, this is not necessarily a disadvantage in this research, since I am rather unbiased by not being part of a certain ethnic group in Ethiopia, and therefore, to a certain extent, unprejudiced in my opinions about Ethiopian politics. This and the fact that I have visited this country many times in the last ten years, which does not make me Ethiopian of course, but at least partially integrated in society as someone who has some cultural and little language knowledge, helps to have an understanding of the context and the difficulties they face. Moreover, I am convinced that research in general can benefit from Westerners who try to enlarge their expertise in taking a chance to do studies within other cultures and continents. The reason is, first of all, it can reduce preconceptions, and at the same time adds this note of an outside perspective that someone who is not directly part of a context can have. Furthermore, resources are often not available to do research in development countries by local researchers, which is why Western researchers who have them should not ignore this part of the world.

In what follows, I will present methodological reflections and assumptions this study is based on and explain and justify in detail my choice of method by describing the research mechanisms step by step. Furthermore, considering the context and the sensitivity of the social media topic

in Ethiopia, ethical issues and reflections about the process of conducting the interviews are necessary to make. These considerations are needed, also due to my own position as a non-African, white person in this research process.

Interpretations of Reality

This research is based on the assumption that the reality around us is socially constructed, which means that we have to take a step away from our "taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world and ourselves" (Burr 2015: 2). Individuals describe and interpret differently what is real in their understanding, influenced by different cultural backgrounds where concepts and definitions are used in specific ways (ibid.: 4). This thesis is interested in personal experiences, beliefs and opinions of social media activists in the region of Tigray in Northern Ethiopia, who interpret the political circumstances in the country in a different way than for example other Ethiopians who live in other parts of the country, or foreign observers like me. The statements made in the interviews by the activists reflect their version of reality and are shaped by their backgrounds of having Tigrayan roots, and by political developments in the region and the country by which they are directly affected.

At the same time, they construct new knowledge every day, through their posting on social media and through interactions with their followers. The social constructionist approach takes these processes as relevant for the understanding of the world. Based on this knowledge production, the focus in social constructionism is on social interactions and practices in society (ibid.: 11), which is mirrored in the analysis of the data. Overall, with this research, I shall take an interpretivist position, which is putting the focus on "how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced, or constituted" (Manson 2002: 3).

One of the difficulties of doing qualitative research with a social constructionist focus is to legitimize and validate the results, because it has this rather big range of interpretation (Burr 2015: 178). A practical way of approaching this issue is to provide as many insights as possible into the analysis process and being reflective about it along the way (ibid.), so that the thinking steps of the researcher can become visible. In the next section, a closer look shall be taken to the sampling and the interviews.

The Research Process

Choice of Method

This study is based on data from qualitative, semi-structured interviews, which were conducted during the first two weeks of March 2020. The participants were either, as they call themselves, full-time bloggers or people who work in another job but use social media in a very active way in order to express their opinions and, as a long-time goal, achieve political change. The constellation of many different ethnic groups and nationalities in Ethiopia is unique, and at the same time highly complex, which is why it is interesting to examine the utilization of online platforms and how the activists participate in the political discourse in the country. I consider interviews as a suitable method to find out about the individual opinions and personal beliefs of these people, their motivations to become an activist in the first place and how they want to convince other fellow Tigrayans to stand in for what they fight for. Through qualitative interviewing, a researcher has the possibility to "explore voices and experiences which they believe have been ignored, misinterpreted or suppressed in the past" (Byrne 2012: 209-10). The voices of the activists have indeed not been heard before they discovered the benefits of digital technologies and new opportunities to have their share in the media landscape in Ethiopia. By using the interview method, the attention is directed towards interpretations of people's realities and the exploration of "micro-dynamics of alternative forms of participation" (Della Porta 2014: 258), such as participation through social media activism. To find out about "meaningful properties of the social reality" (Mason 2002: 63) for people is another objective of conducting qualitative interviews. It allows the actors to use their own words to explain themselves and their own views on reality, and the researcher can get insights in people's value systems and cultural conventions. The bloggers, in other words, have the chance to present their own perspectives of what is currently happening in Ethiopia, unfiltered, face-to-face, and uncensored, from their point of view.

Sampling and Interviews

The participants were recruited through snowballing (Byrne 2012: 218), a strategy to get in contact with possible participants through other people such as friends or interviewees who have further recommendations about other persons. I got in touch with all my respondents through two friends whom I have met during my former stays in Ethiopia. One person is a social media activist himself (whom I talked to in interview 1) and the other is a country-wide known journalist, who both have a big network which I could draw from. One limitation with this

strategy is the probability that these networks consist of like-minded people, which could result in diminishing the sample, and it was my friends who picked the participants, probably having their own selection criteria which I was not completely able to influence (Byrne 2012: 2018). Still, as activists in Tigray usually have similar goals they want to reach with their posts and writings, they picked who was available, who could speak English, and who was able to share reliable information, in their opinion.

The interviews were all conducted in Ethiopia because of several reasons. I decided to travel to the country, first because the unstable internet connection would not allow smooth interviews through online communication, for example through Skype, which could have been a disrupting factor in the process. Second, it was very difficult to plan the interviews beforehand due to another cultural understanding of organising appointments. The best way was therefore to travel to the country and arrange the interviews from there. Spontaneity was important, some interviews took place right after I called the people to ask if they were willing to participate. Besides doing interviews with the activists, I usually met them before or spent more time with them afterwards. Over coffee or lunch, I could learn a lot more about the context of their activism in an informal way by having casual chats with them. This also benefitted the trust building process between researcher and interviewees, because the bloggers could learn about me, my background and my interest in the country and specifically in Tigray. The third reason was because I wanted to feel the atmosphere in which Ethiopia finds itself at the moment. By talking to other people and by spending time with the activists, I was able to grasp a little bit of the mood and, in addition, learn more about the political and ethnic contexts. I was also able to attend a lecture at Mekelle University in Tigray with the title, “The Emergence and Transformation of Tigray Nationalism: What next?”, which was useful in gaining background knowledge about the context, amongst others.

The interviews were mostly held in public places, such as hotel lobbies or cafes, by the activists’ own choice, and one was in a private office. Unfortunately, I was only able to recruit male participants, because at the moment it is mainly a business where men are engaging, at the moment. Other than that, the sample was very multifaceted, I met people who are full-time bloggers, but also lecturers from the local university, a student, someone who works in a local governmental office, or a medical doctor. These different backgrounds helped to shed light on the topic from different perspectives, and in a different way. Some people focus more on

breaking news and dealing with topics that show up during a normal day, others are trying to give analytical insights to their followers in a more in-depth way.[3]

Analysis

The analysis started with transcribing the big amount of data[4], which gave me an additional possibility to get familiar with the data, remembering the interview situations and writing down some first points of observations. As a second step, the interviews were re-read and coded by using open coding, line by line and sentence by sentence, by writing down words and phrases that describe the data accurately (Rivas 2012: 370). In addition, the in-vivo coding approach was used, taking into consideration the terms and language which were directly applied in the interviews by the activists themselves (ibid.: 372). During this process, and as Rivas suggests, it is essential to constantly take the big picture of the data into consideration as well as asking questions, for example about internal consistency (ibid.: 373). I took a lot of notes that crossed my mind during the coding process, which helped me to organize my data before even putting it into categories and themes, one last step that was performed after the open coding. The emerging themes and categories were constantly being revised and changed until they seemed logic and applicable in order to continue with the analysis[5].

Ethics and Reflections

Expressing beliefs and opinions which are of political nature can be a sensitive issue in Ethiopia, a detail which the activists talked about in the interviews by describing their fears and possible consequences they might face or already have faced. As the interviews were mostly conducted in public places, there was a concern that the participants would be inhibited to a certain part to speak openly about the topic, which, in my opinion, did not happen. It is possible that they, first of all, expose themselves anyway over social media, mostly with their own names, and therefore are not being afraid of being outspoken. Second, the reason why they discuss about such matters in public could be in connection to their impression of feeling safe in Tigray, their home region, since they have many supporters there, also in local government institutions. Still, the researcher has a responsibility throughout the research process, for example to protect the identity of the

[3] All the information about the participants can be found in Appendix A.
[4] Appendix D shows an example of a transcribed interview.
[5] Further information about the coding process, as well as descriptions of categories and themes and connections to the research questions are illustrated in Appendix E.

interview participants. There is no perfect approach to ethics other than it is the researcher's responsibility to ask questions about ethical issues when designing the research and also during the process of analysis (Mason 2002: 42). Most importantly, one should be aware of the situation and to think first about what influence ethics might have on the research in general, on the research questions, and on the applied methods (ibid.: 45). One way of facing these issues is to choose the applied method of qualitative interviewing, which helps to give the participants the chance to "represent their perspectives more fully and fairly" (ibid.: 67). At the beginning of every interview, a consent form was handed out to the interviewees[6] in order to get their written permission to record the information, to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, and to give them the option to stop the interview at any time. In addition, and especially during the analysis process, identifiers such as stated names during the interviews were removed (Kaiser 2009: 1635), and all the details were carefully reconsidered to protect the respondents' identity.

This deliberative attitude during the research process is not only important for ethical reasons, but also in order to be aware that the researcher has a specific role and influence on the interviewees while conducting the interviews (Byrne 2012: 213). In fact, an interview is best being seen as a co-production of the interviewer and the interviewee (Mason 2002: 63; Burr 2015: 172), because the impact of the interaction between these two persons should not be downplayed and can have a certain influence on what answers are being given by the participant. Therefore, and what has already been mentioned, a good basis of trust between the researcher and the participant is needed. What is more, the standpoint of the researcher also plays an important role in the process of data analysis. The social constructionism approach follows the assumption that it is not possible to be objective and to have a neutral attitude as a researcher (Burr 2015: 172). The personal backgrounds and belief systems of every researcher, their own way of seeing the reality, so to speak, will affect the interpretations being made. I will represent a rather pro-Tigrayan position, however without wanting to give too much interpretation about political processes in Ethiopia.

It becomes visible in the interviews for this research, that it was very important for the activists to make me as a person coming from the West aware of their situation, because they want to be seen and their problems should be recognized internationally. It was then also their wish that I am going to help them to make people outside of Ethiopia aware of what is happening in the country. The interview participants, as it seemed to me, saw as an additional opportunity to

[6] See Appendix B

expand their activism through this study. This has to be considered in the analysis, since, with this mindset, they were usually noticeably talking to me as if they were talking to a bigger audience. On the other hand, this anticipatory attitude, and in addition my Western standpoint on the situation, also supported the recruitment process insofar as everybody was ready to share his thoughts on the topic.

Not only did the interviewees advertise the region of Tigray and the nature of Tigray nationalism to me, they also wanted to make sure that they are a credible source for my research. Their focus was to emphasise repeatedly that they do not post fake news and that they cross-check their content, if it is controversial and if they are not sure if the news is true or not. What is more, and it is probably in the nature of an activist, to perform in a certain way, they explained me in detail the political context, which I was familiar with beforehand. Performance also became visible in contradictory statements, such as their aspiration to reach a wide audience, not only from Tigray but also from the rest of Ethiopia, including the international community, but their posts are mainly in their local language Tigrinya.

The role of the researcher is not only important while conducting the interviews, but also in the rest of the process, such as the analysis of the data. One difficulty, which came up in this research, was that the interviews were held in English, which is neither the mother tongue of the researcher nor, and more importantly, of the interviewees. It was hard for some participants to understand the questions, first of all, and it was sometimes a challenge to interpret what they exactly meant when they answered the questions. I have been in touch with Ethiopians many times, and claim to know how they express themselves in English and in what way they use certain words. Still, it might have an influence on the analysis of the data.

4. Analysis

The analysis of the interviews generated insights into the social media use of the bloggers, and specifically four key points emerged, which should be discussed in this chapter. First of all, the attention will be on the activists themselves, and how their activities in online media get intertwined in the political context. The personal influences the political (Highfield 2016: 3), in terms of that these activists share their own thoughts and opinions to other individuals and at the same time participate in the ongoing political discourse. The second discussion will focus on social media, the main tool that the activists make use of in their everyday political participation. A comparison of old and new media adds to the understanding in what way social media benefits or empowers people in a way that traditional media such as newspapers or television cannot do. Third, the issue of Cybernationalism and reconstruction of ethnic values shall further be explored by touching upon the importance of Tigrayan identity and Tigrayan nationalism. These concepts are summarized under the term "Tigrawaynet", which is one of the driving forces to become active in the first place for the activists. As a last key point, we will see what possible consequences online political participation can have for the offline social life, in other words, how the everyday political activities by the activists have an impact on the political situation in the region and the country. This interlinkage of online and offline spaces can help us amongst others to understand why social media can have possible impacts in a country like Ethiopia, where the majority is not using any digital platforms, mostly due to the lack of access and technology knowledge.

The Politicization of the Personal

The aim of this section is to illustrate how the activists in Tigray participate in political discussions in Tigray and Ethiopia and in what way they are influenced by their personal backgrounds. Van Dijk and Hacker (2018: 65) argue that one of the important characters of online platforms shows itself in that they are "interpersonal channels" which gives political debates a personal note. In this case, this personal characteristic is initiated and represented by the activists who, with their personal experiences and opinions, try to influence their audiences. There are various connections between the personal and the political, which will be explored hereafter, by first focusing on the personal lives of the activists and how this can have an influence on how their personal way of participating looks like.

The Formal and Informal Job: The Integration of Participation in Everyday Life

> "In general, I'm a lecturer at […] Mekelle university, […] so, my formal job is… uhm, I'm serving as a lecturer. And in addition, I am also a writer, I published a book, and also political active, politically […] Currently I'm working with my friends to establish a new party, Tigray Independence Party, and… so, I'm a multi-tasking person." (Interview 7)

Many of the activists are not full-time bloggers, but have a profession, like being a lecturer, a medical doctor, or website developer. They have "a formal job", as one respondent expresses it, which indicates that he sees his blogging as informal, not as something regular and organized like a job. For most of the people, their activities on Facebook is not the way they get an income, which is why they differ between "formal" and "informal", connecting the formal to the situation of getting an income. "I was quite active in academy, […] these formal structures of engagement" (Interview 4). This and other respondents are dependent on their jobs outside of online platforms and are active in their free time, which is possible with social media. One of the benefits of social media for the activists is that they can post anytime and at any place, which allows them to work and being involved in online activism at the same time. Their posting gets closely interwoven in their everyday lives, which is also a result of further advanced technologies such as mobile phones that make the internet available around the clock and in whatever places someone is. One of the participants says that one of the big benefits of social media "is, I think, time. […] You can post, when you feel. And wherever you are, and… in time and place" (Interview 10)

The private expertise and experiences from their jobs certainly have an influence on what the activists post and in what way they participate in political discussions.

> "I'm not using Facebook actively just like others, since I have job in a governmental office, that's the reason." (Interview 8)

This respondent cannot post too sensitive topics, and he cannot be as critical as other people who are not directly involved with governmental institutions, otherwise it would have direct consequences in his life, like losing his work. "Not actively just like the others" still means that he posts "three or four posts the day", as he adds. The benefits of his personal professional situation are that he has insights into critical information, also because he is a former party member:

> "When I was in the party, I have, uhm, it's a position, lower level position, so I was active in politics, so I know little bit about EPRDF and TPLF, and that's make me active in social media." (Interview 8)

He can use the inside information and knowledge from his earlier career and from his current job to give his followers some insights in how politics work, by sharing this kind of content that other people do not have access to. Furthermore, it was also the driving motivation to make him active in the first place, because he felt that the higher officials that he met during his active time in the party,

> "don't care about the people, they don't care about the property of our people, they worry about their position, they are for their own life. […] So, I use the Facebook platform […] to protect the Tigrayan people." (Interview 8)

Some of the participants of this study are, as they call themselves, full-time bloggers who are not making a difference between the informal and the formal but dedicate their whole time to their political engagement over social media and made it to the central focus of their lives. This example illustrates that political participation of activists can have a broad range of how intense the actual engagement is and that not all of the activists are involved with the same fervour.

> "The thing is, I have to post when I get an issue, so in the last two years, specifically in the last two, three years, there are issues almost every hour in the country, so I have to cope up. So, recently I'm almost full time blogger, or full time social activist, social media activist, so I post very much, that's what I can say, I post every hour, every two hours, three hours; there is not a day in the last two years where I skipped the posting." (Interview 1)

This participant points out that, in order to be consistent and to have continuous activities on his page as a full-time blogger, he has to be attentive during the whole day. He spends most of his time with posting pictures of situations that he sees, information about events he attends, or sharing content from other pages while scrolling through Facebook. Social media became such an integral part of his life that he constantly directs his personal activities to the political goals he wants to achieve with his activism.

Ordinary Citizens and Internet Elites – Roles of the Activists

In regard to this full-time occupation as a blogger and due to the strong entanglement with politics, it is to be argued if the activists can be associated with this concept of an ordinary citizen, which, as discussed in a previous chapter, is considered to be one of the central aspects of political participation. Van Dijk claims that successful bloggers, or activists, can actually not

be described as ordinary but rather "internet elites" who do not, in any way, represent the ordinary in that sense (2018: 45). Activists do certainly have certain knowledge about digital platforms that they utilise for their own purpose that other groups of people in society do not have. This level of proficiency makes them to elites in this field, as the following statement visualizes:

> "For about nine or ten years, I'm familiar with Facebook, especially the last… since 2012 and and 2013, I consider myself as one of the social media participants, or, in a very, uhm, unhumble way, social media influencers maybe, yeah." (Interview 4)

Influencers on social media do have another position as an average user who is more likely to be referred to as the "normal". However, in a political context outside of social media in Ethiopia, influencers, activists, and average users have equally few opportunities to participate in political processes. Political elites such as members of governmental institutions and officials are sharing the power and there is few, if no room from people outside of this circle to be included.

> "Social media, especially in our context, gave us a rare opportunity. Medias, mediums of communication, are usually the domains of the government. There were exclusive clubs of a ruling party. So, it has served significant purpose, like becoming an alternative voice, kind of." (Interview 4)

Alternative media offers ordinary citizens, who are not elites in power, the chance to "have their voices heard and valued" (Carpentier 2011: 97) in political discourses. To be visible and to be heard in a political setting emphasises the idea of defining the Tigrayan activists as "ordinary" or "normal" in their everyday political participation through online platforms. This has to be seen in opposition to the central Ethiopian government, which represents the political elites in power.

The theoretical distinction regarding participation *in* and *through* the media (Carpentier 2011: 67-68) can bring further clarification to the question of the "ordinary" and the "elite". The activists, with a few exceptions, are mainly participating in politics *through* the media because they are trying to have an influence on political discourses and actions. They do this as "internet elites" but mobilize against "political elites" which are, as discussed, the power holders.

> "My posts are mostly about the… competition, in Ethiopia, the political competition, and the insincerity, the insincerity of Abiy Ahmed's, uhm, government, and, about the insincerity of Abiy Ahmed's government, not only about politics, or in, in general terms. This takes most of the posts from the past weeks." (Interview 5)

The social media activities of this participant are oriented towards dismantling Ethiopian politics and criticising the Prime Minister, by using the Internet, in his expertise in belonging to the digital elite, as a tool to participate. This does not mean, though, that he is part of the political elite, but more in his role as an ordinary citizen in the Tigrayan society.

Government Strategies and Personal Consequences of Political Participation

The activists are all together reaching out for this long-term goal of changing the current situation in the country and in the region by targeting existing political structures and power relations. The government, according to the interviewees, has its own "strategies" (de Certeau 1984) to stay in power and to hamstring political involvements of any kind from outside political structures. De Certeau emphasises that someone controlling a certain space to manifest their power uses strategies in order to do so. On the other hand, the people without governmental power positions come up with "tactics" to adapt to their environment created and dominated by rules and regulations of the power holders (1984: xix). In Ethiopia, the activists have to deal every day with the circumstances of having bad internet connection, or no connection at all, and censorship, all these measures enforced as "strategies" by the government.

> "If they [the central government] can't win the battle in social media, the thing they would do is just to shut down for months. So, shutting down has its own meaning, it means, the government has physical organization, it has a military, police, secrecy office, administratives, persons, intelligence, and everything. So, by shutting down the internet, they are destroying the capability of the opposition to collectively act." (Interview 4)

The regime tries to silence the digital opponents by taking the course of action of censoring certain platforms, especially social media platforms, or by even enforcing complete internet shutdowns, which has happened eight times, only in 2019 (Human Rights Watch, 2020). These circumstances surely make it harder for the activists to realize their goals. Nevertheless, they have various answers to that in their everyday political participation, such as the utilization of virtual private networks (VPN) for censored pages. There is also a reasonable number of activists in the Tigrayan diaspora living in Europe, North America or in Arab countries who are blogging from abroad which allows them to avoid censorship and speak their minds.

Besides these restrictions, social media activists all over the country are endangered to face personal consequences because being politically active on social media in Ethiopia can have serious outcomes. As one interviewee states: "Sometimes, the price is maybe very heavy to

pay" (Interview 4). He personally had to stop with his PhD program that he started in Addis Ababa, the capital city, because he was afraid of government actions against him and therefore, he moved back to Tigray to his family: "When I came from Addis I just, re-joined my family after some, eleven or ten years, like a child, without any work" (Interview 4). Another activiist faced several difficult situations:

> "My first account was blocked, uhm, by the government, probably. […] Then I made another one, second one, that was also blocked, immediately, that… it stayed only for a few months. […]. Also, I was arrested for a day, they were even trying to fire me from my job." (Interview 2)

There are known cases of activists who have been imprisoned for a long time, in the whole country. The problem with authoritarian systems is that "some official in some desk whom I never heard of is probably getting offended" (Interview 5). People who express their opinions which are usually in opposition to the government are being taken actions against to prevent them from further blogging. These statements indicate that the participants of the study are aware of the risks, also that they expose themselves to the public and to the political actors and institutions. Nevertheless, they say that they feel safe when they are in Tigray, because it is, first of all, a safe region, and second, they have this common shared identity of being Tigrayan, which makes them feel safe amongst people of their own.

In short, with their decision to blog about political issues, the activists' involvement in political discussions becomes undeniably interwoven with their personal backgrounds. They use their personal experiences such as their influence of their professional lives, or their Tigrayan roots, to engage in political discourses and argue for their cause. In this way their everyday practices function as a basis for their engagement (Highfield 2016: 29). In the context of Ethiopia, relations between the personal and political especially become apparent such as that political posting can have direct personal consequences for the bloggers, for example imprisonment or blocks of Facebook profiles or pages. Despite these individual consequences, it is not an option for the bloggers to stop what they are doing, which is strongly connected to the general thinking in Ethiopia about ethnicity and culture and the aim to protect and maintain these traditions. This strong question of identity will be part of the analysis in the third section of this chapter. First, it is worth having a look at the actual tool of the activists, digital technologies, and what advantages and opportunities they see in the use of social media for their activism.

The Emergence of New Opportunities – Comparing the Old and the New Media

Forms of participation in political discourses certainly have changed since the emergence of digital technologies (Dahlgren 2013: 33, van Dijk & Hacker 2018: 55). The activists are aware of these new possibilities of participation and try to utilize it to their own advantage. The term "new media" can be differently understood by different people, one person connoting it to the internet, blogs, or social media, another to new forms of gaming or virtual reality (Lister et al. 2009: 12). What they have in common is this notion of "newness" (ibid.) which contains an ideological ascription of something that is being better than the old (Mudhai et al. 2009: 3). The following section will shed lights on what the activists, from their point of view, mean by referring to the "old" and the "new", by laying the focus first on the traditional or mainstream media. In contrast to the old media, the role and importance of the new media for the activists will further be illustrated, followed by a discussion of how the old and the new media influence each other.

The Censored Old Media and New Possibilities of Participation

"They are the mouth of the government" (Interview 8), this summarizes well what the activists think about the traditional media such as newspapers, radio or television. The government controls what news is being distributed there, and the news is framed in the interests and benefits of the authorities, which are accused to censor the information they do not want to have published.

> "The newspapers are very much censored, not political, not… of course, there were private media who is not under censorship, but even the private newspaper, they choose contents… they publish articles, contributions, based on their content appeal, rather than the actual quality or the factual base." (Interview 5)

These descriptions stand in contrast to the fact that Ethiopia actually made progress in the 2019 World Press Freedom Index by ranking 110th out of 180 countries, which is a plus of 40 positions compared with the year before (Reporters Without Borders, 2020). This is because actions have been taken by the new Prime Minister to improve the situation of journalists and bloggers, since he took office in 2018. This improvement should not obscure that the traditional media still have a fairly negative image in society, despite the fact that besides the state media, the establishment of private media have become common in recent years. The experiences of past times play a big role for the journalists and limits their willingness to talk openly about certain affairs, because they are afraid of consequences.

Compared to the traditional media, social media provides opportunities in many ways for the activists. Not only are they new means of communication which makes it easy to get in contact with other people, but create entirely new communicative spaces.

> "It's a new world, it's a new social environment, so, uhm, it's a… social environment, the traditional social environment simply moved to the digital platform. So, the benefits are endless. It outweighs the traditions." (Interview 5)

The statement of this respondent gives us only a slight idea of how important social media has become for users and specifically activists in Ethiopia in the last few years. This particular person has been active for ten years, together with a few others, back at that time where social media "was a playground of the few who can write and understand English" (Interview 4). These people witnessed the growing relevance of online platforms and the continuous increase of numbers of bloggers and activists who joined the network since then. The social environment, which has always been in existence, but more offline than online, has fundamentally changed with the advent of the internet, and so have the communicative practices and habits of the people. What is more, it has become less exclusive to the extent that possibilities of participation are more open to the general public and the technical knowledge in society has increased compared to the situation as it was ten years ago. These new spaces can be connected to the idea of public sphere which also changed with the emergence of online platforms (Dahlgren 2012: 100) in that it enlarged the scope of pubic opinion forming through a higher diversity of voices which come together in these new social environments.

One of the remarkable attributes of social media in contrast to old media is its nature of being interactive. Ordinary people have the possibility to exchange ideas and experiences with their friends in an easy manner, and the activists use this advantage for their own purpose: "You know what people are saying, how people are thinking, and you are really seeing people's opinions" (Interview 7). This respondent uses social media as a research field, something that gives him an insight in people's minds. Usually the people are more willing to share their thoughts online than in other environments, and in the bloggers' view this gives them the opportunity to directly interact with their followers and to take it to a personal level, which, with traditional media, is not possible. The aspect of social media as being an "alternative voice" (Interview 4) for the audience, and especially for the bloggers who can express their opinions, give them a certain level of freedom that the traditional media and, what is more important, the political context in the country cannot give them. Both areas are occupied either by politicians,

journalists and other professional figures who dominate the discourse and leave no room for others to access and to communicate their own ideas. (Dahlgren 2013: 94, 99) In this regard, the new media offers new chances to a broader public to engage in their own way.

Facebook will kill Ethiopia - Social Media and the Metaphor of War

Social media, as the activists agree on and which reinforces the importance of online platforms in comparison to newspapers or the radio, is widely being considered as "the best platform to win against the enemy" (Interview 1). They find themselves in a battle against the central government in Addis Ababa, which they describe as the enemy that has to be defeated and eliminated. Social media becomes not only a concrete, practical tool for the activists, but also has an ideological aspect in that it encourages and motivates them to face this battle.

> Tigrayans were killed, Tigrayans were displaced, they have lost their property, due to the violence of the others. […] the target were the innocent Tigrayans, yeah. As Tigrayan, I feel sad, I feel anger and I want to defend, as much as I can and as much as possible, that's… my gun is the platform, the social media, yeah." (Interview 8)

Throughout all the interviews which were conducted for this study, the participants speak about Facebook as their "gun" which allows them to attack their opponents, people who want to harm Tigrayans, or harass them in other parts of the country. They specifically fight against the regime, virtually, by uncovering their strategies and their ways of thinking, and in particular their plans towards a unified Ethiopia which is a danger for the Tigrayan identity. They want to point out "the exclusionary politics from the centre, the betrayal of the Tigrayan people, the dismissal of ours as humans" (Interview 2), which indicates a lot about their emotional feelings towards the way in which Ethiopian politics has been executed recently.

Singer and Brooking (2018) pick up this idea of the web as a battlefield. In their work *LikeWar – The Weaponization of Social Media*, they come to the conclusion that the internet is "a platform for achieving the goals of whichever actor manipulates it most effectively" (261). What they emphasize is that anybody who makes use of digital platforms – and they do not only mean activists who want to contribute to democratization processes, but also terrorist groups or governments – can apply it as a tool to realize their plans, if they manage to incorporate it to their advantage. Social media is not only used "bottom-up" by the activists but "top-down" (van Dijk & Hacker 2018: 141). The government in Ethiopia is of no exception:

> "They [the government] are organizing a serious army of Facebookers and Twitterers, they are doing that right now. They are given training to different, with different language" (Interview 4)

The regime is choosing this strategy, according to this recipient, for surveillance of the online space and, besides the other measures, having another instrument of control over undesired activities.

Despite this course of action, the activists regard themselves as being in a more powerful position on online platforms, because they claim to know about the strategies of the regime as well as to be more successful in mobilizing people. Digital technologies empower them and brings this strong belief to the surface that they, through their writings, can actually change something about the current situation in Ethiopia. This persuasion and the circumstances of missing equality and the lack of proper political rights leaves social media to be a strong tool, which makes another recipient even go as far as stating:

> "People are not getting democratic rights, political rights, […] and for us, just having social media is a good… just opportunity, to express your rights, so to organize yourself, and to defend your ideas, in the interest of society, social interest. Uhm, it was an opening gate in politics, and many people in certain parts of Ethiopia were organizing themselves and spreading their ideas on Facebook, same is here. And I think, Facebook will kill Ethiopia, yeah, because in my opinion, Ethiopia is not a proper state, it's an empire, we have different nations, with different interests, and people are advocating for their own interests, in one or the other way. The disintegration of Ethiopia is becoming real." (Interview 7)

This comparison of the situation with an actual war implies how serious the bloggers take their postings and reveals the strong belief that they can actually change something and can influence political structures in the country. The existence of social media contributes to a feeling of empowerment which motivates the users to participate in the political discourse, and to the existence of hope for better and fair circumstances for everybody in the future.

The Connection of Old and New – An Interdependent Relation

Despite the activists' optimistic opinions of having this entirely new opportunity of social media which enables them to influence public opinions, the old and the new media are not as clearly separated as the discussion so far signals. Instead, their practices are overlapping, and mainstream and alternative media should be seen as being closely linked to each other (Dahlgren 2009: 175). New, technology-based ways of mediated information offer new possibilities; however, the traditional media has often still been regarded as being the drive media in fostering general discourses among citizens (Waisbord 2005: 89). And still, the

significance of social media seems to have been growing. The activists see one of the reasons in that there is a withhold of necessary information in the traditional media in Ethiopia:

> "Social media is now playing a critical role because of the weakness of the journalists and we are meeting that gap to spread our own message." (Interview 1)

This gap where journalists have not been satisfying people's demands was filled by activists on Facebook and all the other online platforms who provide the missing knowledge to the people, from their standpoint. They get the chance to spread their own message and can counter, or add to information that professional journalists leave out of the media, be it forced through censorship or by their own choice.

Another example mentioned by the participants where they see the influence of the new media on the old is as follows:

> "In Ethiopia, [social media], it's the most important thing, not one of, the most, the leading one is social media, exactly. Because, the people in another, in mainstream media, they are much influenced by social media, most of them report social media news as it is". (Interview 1)

Issues which are discussed on online platforms make their way into the old media, which in fact opens up new doors in that the activists indirectly are able to access the domain of newspapers and other traditional media. Journalists and the ones in charge within these domains, as the activists observe, are being forced to pick up online discourses. Most of these professional people belong to the minority in Ethiopia with access to the Internet and are therefore active social media users as well, which gives them the opportunity to follow the activists by observing what they post and in what discussions they take part in.

One way in which the old media has an impact on the new media does not become obvious in the interviews that have been conducted for this research, but is more based on the experiences I made during my many visits in Ethiopia. Every household which is connected to an electric power line possesses a TV, which is usually switched on the whole day, as far as someone is at home. In this way, news and information are made accessible to the people in a very traditional manner. The same scenarios can be observed in public places such as restaurants, cafes or hotel lobbies, which show the latest news or entertainment programs on their screens. Activists can get inspired or incited while watching TV to post about topics that are broadcasted, and to share opinions about what they see and hear.

Overall, the strength and the potential of social media can be interpreted as a result of the weaknesses of the traditional media in Ethiopia, such as their incompetence to provide the people with necessary information about political issues. However, the analysis shows that the influence is both-sided and it is not possible to strictly separate the old and the new. This can be interpreted in the sense that it relativizes these optimistic voices who regard social media as their big chance to overthrow and make the traditional media forgotten. Yet still and as it was pointed out in other studies, new media technologies can indeed serve as an alternative option, especially in authoritarian regimes, to make protest voices heard, mainly due to the incapability of control by ruling elites (Dugo 2017: 63).

The reflections about the activists in the first part and the previous discussion about new opportunities of participation through digital technology come together in the next section where the focus will be on the notion of "Tigrawaynet". One goal of the bloggers is to strengthen this nationalist sentiment of being Tigrayan, which they try to achieve with the help of social media. For that reason, it is worth to have a look at how this Tigrayan identity is represented and to what the bloggers actually relate when they talk about Tigray nationalism.

Tigray First - Ethnic Identity and Online Nation-Building

> "I will say, as a Tigray nationalist, Tigray first. That's it." (Interview 9)

Tigray first, like America first proclaimed by Donald Trump, has strong associations with the notion of identity and origin. In Ethiopia, feelings of identity of people are to a great extent formed and shaped by which ethnic group they belong to. Out of over 80 ethnicities in the country, Tigray is one of the bigger nations, and still relatively small with only covering 6% of the whole Ethiopian population, compared to other nationalities such as the Oromo which 34% of the Ethiopians are part of. As I previously touched upon, protecting Tigrayan values and Tigrayan identity is the most important reason for the bloggers to get active on social media. This is the reason why this section will first of all talk about what the bloggers exactly mean when referring to nationalism and Tigrawaynet. Furthermore we shall see how Tigrawaynet is articulated on social media and, since media has always been part of spreading nationalist sentiments by reproducing and reinforcing them (Eriksen 1993: 106), what role digital technologies play in the nationalist discussions in the country.

Digital Woyane – The Tigrayan Online Revolution

Most of the online activities of various activists in Tigray can be brought together under the umbrella of the so called Digital Woyane, a social movement which does not have a structure or an organization behind. Social movements, to give a short definition, are networks of individuals or groups loosely tied together, who are involved in a conflicting political or cultural situation. This happens "on the basis of a shared collective identity" (Diani 1992: 13), which is this notion of Tigrawaynet in the context of this case study. "Woyane", in Tigrinya, means "revolution" and the idea is built on the Woyane revolt which emerged in 1943 to protect Tigray against the Ethiopian regime lead by the emperor at that time, Haile Selassie (Prunier 2010).

One of the participants tries to express what his understanding of Digital Woyane is:

> "Digital Woyane first called by the regional government president, Dr. Gebretsion, digital Woyane means, fighter, fighting, used two words we can call it that one, uhm… that means, we have to fight, ideally, in using ideas as our, uhm, gun, this instrument, to persuade and to show what is the facts that matter most, the recession, the abusement, uhm, Tegaru [Tigrayan] political prisoners, and the government's way of, uhm, doing dramas, or, uhm… and […] we have to fight back, and we have to, we have to attack, using ideas, using digital things, images, videos, whatever." (Interview 9)

Digital Woyane, an expression first made by the President of the local party TPLF[7] has taken this revolutionary thinking of the first period of Woyane to a new level. "Digital" refers to the fact that this revolt is currently happening through digital technologies on social media platforms, and not as an armed struggle as it occurred in the 1940's. The ambition in these two periods of time are the same, the securing of extended federalist structures in the whole country and more Tigrayan sovereignty for the region as well as pointing out the injustice that Tigrayan people have to experience. As a side note, some participants do not like to talk about and identify themselves with the movement because, in their opinion, it is too closely related to the local government. The TPLF, in past times, have not always been in favour of people who were criticising them, such as the social media activists. Nevertheless, Digital Woyane is illustrating this Tigrayan thinking and the aspirations and dreams about a prosperous future for the region, using the new opportunities of social media to revolutionize the system.

Tigrawaynet – Marking the Online-Territory

Before the attention is turned to how Tigrawaynet is represented on online platforms, it is of significance to define what is actually understood under this term in order to find out what the

[7] Tigray People's Liberation Front

activists exactly want to maintain and what their main motivation is to participate. Defining Tigrawaynet can be complicated and controversial, because "it might be different thing to different person, but so is for any nation" (Interview 5). This participant makes clear that questions of what ethnic and national identities contain are not easy to answer and cannot be generalized. Every nation, according to several recipients, has its own special values worth being maintained and protected by its members.

> "I think, in my perspective, any… people, any nation, nationality have its own special thing, and anyone is siding, or is for his own nationality, or nationalism." (Interview 8)

In the discussion about nationalism, I attempted to visualise that there is always an in-group and an out-group (Barth 1969, Hall 1996, Wodak et al. 2009), in other words, an individual belongs to a nation and is excluded from another one. The question to be asked is, who is part of the nation of Tigray, then, and who is not?

> "Somebody to be called Tigrawaynet, one, it should have family from Tigray, should know at least some of the values of Tigrayan society, and should be proud of Tigray, being Tigrayan, and I think you become Tigrayan by blood. So, it's a social construct, and genetic mechanism, it's a combination of that, and the society is unique, despite being small." (Interview 2)

Many components play a role, as this participant tries to give an answer. In his opinion, Tigrawaynet is both a social construct and a given characteristic through someone being born from Tigrayan descendants. Tigrawaynet is being constructed and defined by the Tigrayan society, which makes it hard to exactly explicate the qualities. For sure, it is a matter about genetics, by having parents who are Tigrayans, by growing up in the region, but also by feeling emotionally attached to Tigray, such as showing excitement and pride. Further important is the knowledge and awareness of the values of Tigrayan society in order to be able to behave like a Tigrayan and to represent the nation in a positive manner. What results out of the interviews overall is, despite including only a small part of the population of Ethiopia, Tigray is being seen as unique. Therefore, they put great effort in maintaining and fostering this cultural thinking, through their social media channels.

Other participants get more concrete about these specific values that represent Tigrawaynet:

> "Tigrawaynet, is, it's accommodating, it's not, uhm, about hostility, it's not paranoid, it's very stable, it's peaceful, and its base… it's about pride. It's about honour, about respect, it's about truth, these are the values, it's about justice. It's about equality. […] Nobody's below, nobody's up." (Interview 10)

The welcoming culture of Tigray is emphasized here as well as by many other respondents as one of the most important values. The region is considered as one of the safest in the country, which is strongly connected to this notion of Tigrawaynet in how to host and treat guests. This statement is underlined by another blogger, who says that "even the people who hate Tigray can live safe in Tigray" (Interview 8). Furthermore, as Tigrawaynet means treating guests with respect, the activists demand that Tigrayans are to be treated with respect as well, and this is one reason of their strong opposition of the central Ethiopian government, because they cannot feel and see this esteem towards Tigray and its people.

The interpretations of Tigrawaynet are mostly made based on the assumption that other nations are not accentuating these values as strong as Tigrayan people do. It comes back to the interpretations of Stuart Hall who argues that identity aspects can only be described by illustrating what it is actually not (1996: 4-5). If Tigrawaynet should be produced and maintained through digital technologies, one has then also to be able to see what it is not. In discussions about nationalism this can often be visualised with actual borders who are marking the territory of a certain ethnic group. The Internet is not a space where territory is clearly marked, which is why methods have to be found to demarcate these terrains with another approach (Palmer 2012: 120). Tigrayans are part of Ethiopia, but at the same time, as the activists emphasise, they see this "Ethiopian-ness" as the other and point this out whenever they can in order to show what Tigrawaynet is not.

> "In Ethiopia, the biggest issue now is, there are people who believe in identity of their own nation, and there are other people who are against this, uhm, national identity and who'd like to say only Ethiopian exists, only Ethiopia, there is no Tigray, there is no Amhara, people who claim we don't need an ethnic groups to be favoured, but we want one kind of identity. People who wants the Ethiopian identity only, which doesn't exist, as to me. […] So, […] we've been exposed that," (Interview 1)

This respondent is expressing his thoughts about an Ethiopian identity by referring to the existence of over 80 ethnic groups, assembled under the umbrella of one big country. His, and others' opinions are that it is not possible to get a uniformed policy, which is Prime Minister Abiy's highest priority and represents the philosophy of "medemer"[8] (Yibeltal 2019). The activists argue that there will always be groups who benefit, and nations who will have disadvantages with governmental formations suggested by the Prime Minister. They are concerned that federalist structures of Ethiopia and the rights of nations, nationalities and

[8] The literal translation of the Amharic word "medemer" is addition, but in Ethiopia it is often understood in the sense of "coming together" or "unify".

peoples, anchored in the constitution (Article 39)[9], will be disregarded, and the values, history and traditions of the ethnicities will get lost and forgotten. This thinking lets the activists conclude that an Ethiopian identity simply does not exist, and one of their central goals is to expose this on their platforms.

The Articulation of Tigrawaynet on Social Media

Apart from showing that Tigrawaynet is opposite to Ethiopian-ness, the activists also try to reproduce all these Tigrayan values on social media.

> "The main thematic, or the main framework of my writing is nationalism, and the need for an independent Tigrayan state. I may involve into counter-arguments, some, uhm, justifying extra topics, but I'm consistent. I'm only interested on what's about… most usual… on nationalism." (Interview 7)

This participant directs all his writings towards the notion of Tigrawaynet, by applying this nationalist framework, as he calls it. According to him, all his postings are interlinked with these Tigrayan values, and not only does he post his own content but participates in discussions where he defends this Tigrayan nationalism.

There are voices who emphasize another important part of Tigrawaynet in their posts, which is the connection of nationalist sentiments to history and traditions.

> "I post many about Tigrayan nationalism, I think our history, our culture, our tradition, we are proud of our culture and tradition, and we have to post about what can we do to […] improve our, uhm, our society's current situation. I'm proud of my history and if I'm proud of my history I had… I had posted many about the proud history part of our Tigrayans." (Interview 8)

What the people are especially proud of is the history of Tigray, which, as they tell, goes back several thousand years to the Axumite Kingdom[10], one of the big and strong empires of the world in ancient times and the dominant kingdom in Africa (Fattovich 2019: 250). Axum is a still existing town in Tigray, and the Tigrayans claim to be direct descendants of that time, which is a big heritage to carry. Thomas Hylland Eriksen argues that "notions of shared origins are usually crucial for ethnic identities" (1993: 59), for as history is connected to how and why individuals feel themselves attached to a specific ethnic group. Historical elements are usually used to "justify, strengthen and maintain" this sense of belonging to an ethnic group (ibid.), and

[9] An English version of the constitution is available here: https://ethiopianembassy.be/wp-content/uploads/Constitution-of-the-FDRE.pdf
[10] Different spellings exist: Axum and Aksum. I stick to the first version.

the activists make use of that on their profiles by reminding their audiences about the "proud history part" with their posts.

The utilization of the local language is one of the particular methods to transmit and point out Tigrawaynet on social media. This is one aspect that is regarded as central to feel as part of an imagined community, to express it in the words of Benedict Anderson (1991: 145, cf. Eriksen 1993: 103, Hall 1996: 4).

> "Physically I use our language to spread, you know, anything. So, I am, I'm indirectly working on promoting the language of the people of Tigray, which is I think the most important thing in building what's on identity, it's language." (Interview 1)

Nationalism and language stand in close connection, because language is a symbol of ethnicity that separates one nation from the other and something which people from a particular ethnic group can identify with (Barth 1969: 10, Bugarski 2001: 73). Almost all the bloggers post mainly in Tigrinya, which makes it possible to reach their audiences in the best way, since they feel convenient in discussing about politics in their own language. The activists use the language as an instrument to convey messages and to make their followers understand the problems they see with the current political system in the country. What is more, the local population usually does have a lack of English knowledge, which makes it necessary to use Tigrinya.

Another method and maybe the most obvious way of making Tigrawaynet visible on social media is simply to select an appropriate profile picture and cover photo for the personal accounts and pages.

> "It's quite visible in my profile picture, yeah. My profile picture is a BBC photo, actually, it was, uhm, a photo, while we were celebrating the championship of Mekelle 70 Inderta [the local football club], we were just, I was with a flag… […] And my photo cover of Facebook is a poster which I paid 500 for an artist to make, it's about release all political prisoners. It's a banner, professionally designed banner by an architect and an artist, a painter. So, it's visible in my Facebook, in my personal posts, and in the newsfeed I see it's almost red and yellow actually, the colour of Tigray. It's quite visible." (Interview 4)

Furthermore, Facebook gives its users the possibility to frame their profile pictures with specific and recent motives, or even to create individual frames. The activists make use of this tool a lot, often by applying the same frame at the same time to represent unity in their ambitions.

Tigrawaynet, in summary, is of great value for the bloggers in that it is an important part of how they identify themselves, but also how they express their belonging to their community:

"It is a lot about identity, collective shared identity" (Interview 5), as this participant concludes his thoughts. In protesting against the Ethiopian government and trying to maintain and preserve Tigrayan values and history, the people of Tigray build on this shared collective identity, which is constantly re-negotiated and re-defined on social media. These online activities can be compiled as cybernationalist structures (Ying 2007, Palmer 2012), which explains that with online platforms, it is possible to develop and amplify nationalist feelings. Through the possibility of reaching a big amount of people all over the globe, these processes do not only take place in a specific territory, but "across the world" (Ying 2007: 1).

This online nation-building and nation-maintaining in Ethiopia only works to the extent that it reaches people who have the possibility to access these spaces, which is still the minority of the Ethiopian citizens. In many regions and especially in the countryside, most of the daily life still takes place in a very traditional setting without online networks. Therefore, there is a need to illustrate how the online is intertwined with the offline, two spaces which cannot be separated anymore in current times because the web is increasingly integrated in the social world (Dahlgren 2013: 37-38).

The Impact of Online Media on Offline Spaces

In a country like Ethiopia, where the internet penetration is still very low and the majority of people who are connected are not active users of social media, it is reasonable to ask if digital media are as influential as asserted by the activists. "With online platforms, obviously, my reach was limited" (Interview 5), states this respondent, who seems to have a rather realistic picture of what he can achieve through digital platforms and who he can reach. Still, the significance of social media gets a lot of credit in Ethiopia, which is, amongst other factors, connected to how online and offline aspects work together. This part of the analysis will deal with how the online and offline spheres are connected to each other by putting the focus on activist networks, by shedding lights on the peculiarities of the Tigrayan society outside of social media. What is more, the impact of social media activities on politics and society in the country will be discussed, which can exemplify the intersection between the online and offline. These considerations give us a possible framework in acquiring knowledge about the potential of social media activities in not so much digital oriented contexts like Ethiopia.

The Significance of Offline Networks in Online Activism

The general opinion of the participants of the study about the success of online activism is that it needs many social media activists who work together in order to see an impact outside of the online platforms, for example in political decisions. One of the respondents is sure that "we share the impact with all the activists" (Interview 1), so, everybody can contribute in his own way and with his own style. For this to work, it needs a network outside of social media to exchange ideas and decide on plans and strategies. During the process of conducting interviews, I was able to see and experience myself how important interchanging of these ideas and discussions about politics are, and how much they are part of the activists' everyday lives.

In addition to that, I got many insights in how they coordinate their actions outside of social media. One example is that special committees are established for managing the situations and events, such as recently "Lekatit 11" which took place in February 2020. This is a celebration every five years about the anniversary of the beginning of the armed struggle in 1974, which eventually overthrew the communist military regime in 1991 in the country. Some of the activists came together to organize common actions, a website was created, and it was self-evident that they participated in the festivities. This engagement, which is "practically on the ground to work towards the advantage of Tigray" (Interview 1), is equally important as their posting, according to the activists. These offline activities support them in their protesting on their online platforms and in their attempt to strengthen nationalist feelings.

To be able to deliver fast information to their communities, the activists are also dependent on their followers and offline connections with friends who provide them with information they would maybe have no access to.

> "Somebody from the rural area writes you, this is happened, with all evidence, this man did this to me, he harassed me, he took my land, something, he exposes that. […] They write, they inbox you, they even talk to you over your phone, so you will have very recent [information]." (Interview 2)

Individuals who the activists might not even know rely on the possibility of reaching people online and tell the activists their personal stories and real-life experiences, which the bloggers usually take into consideration when they post. And sometimes, the activists are only able to deliver fast news because of their connections:

> "Seare was killed, the chief of army was killed. I think I was the first or maybe the second to break the news, because, as I told you he was my neighbour, so a relative of him told me there was gunshot at home, our home, so what's happened, they have to run and check at Seare, he told me, and then I, I was not in Ethiopia actually, so I break the news." (Interview 1)

This respondent reported about a situation where the chief of the army of Ethiopia was assassinated in his house, and he used to be his neighbour when he grew up. That particular incident made this activist's community grow very fast in a short time, and it was his neighbourly relationships that caused this.

Social Media and the Communal Life in Tigray

The offline connotation has particular significance because of the rather frequent internet shutdowns enforced by the central government. It becomes visible that the offline actually has a big impact even when connection is interrupted.

> "You cannot shut down the social media, for one. Second, social media is already there. Once the discourse has started, when coming on social media, we are simply let… the conversation has started. So, after that, you are letting people rely on rumours or, to collect the dots with assumptions and this. In those times, people used to call me to ask me information." (Interview 5)

Facebook and all the other used platforms are international companies, which cannot be taken out of the competition as such. Therefore, the government tries to get as much control as possible over the internet and the flow of information by applying these measures. The problem for the political actors is, as the activists argue, that what is published on social media will be seen despite the shutdowns, and people in the society will start talking about these issues and continue the discourse offline. What complicates things even more for the government, these shutdowns are harmful and it has a direct and observable effect on the economy for the whole country (Taylor 2020).

One additional aspect is that people know alternative channels of getting the information they want such as calling their trustworthy sources, the activists. This is a reflection of the characteristics of Tigrayan society which gives us one potential answer to the question of what influence social media can possibly have in regard to the low internet penetration. Generally speaking, online spaces can never be regarded as isolated spheres from real life situations but are both "part of the larger social and cultural world" (Dahlgren 2013: 33), which lets the virtual and the real environment merge together. This can explain why, even though large parts of the society do not have Internet access, shared content on online platforms can still reach them.

> "The average family size is 8, in Tigray. Among them, at least one of them will have cell phone, there is at least one cell phone in a household, these days, I guess so. At least your friend household will have one. So, you have seen our society, we are very much close to each other and we live a communal life and, […] I mean, somebody will get information and give to as many people as possible within a day. So, information, what's happened here, they will tell." (Interview 2)

People who do not have the possibility of possessing a smartphone either know other people that they can directly contact by for example calling or talking to them, or they will hear recent news, also news spread through social media, at another place. The value of social relationships has a much bigger impact in Ethiopia than in other parts of the world, which means that Ethiopians regularly meet for coffee or visit each other. Being alone, or living alone is usually not practiced, everybody cares about the others and news spread fast even without the support of technology. "Nobody is free from it [social media], everybody will hear at some point" (Interview 10), even these people who are not active or do not have internet connection, which is still the majority of society.

> "What social media make is, people communicate, you know, people talk. If one read my post, he go to friends, he talk about it. He got the… uhm, he suggests, even he can make it his own idea, somehow. He may internalize it, somehow. So, it will be… viral, somehow, you know." (Interview 9)

The Ethiopian way of living together and communicating considerably amplifies the impact of social media to the extent that it can make content go viral outside of online spaces, as it is explained by this recipient. One should not forget, however, that this is a one-sided opinion and that further research is needed about the situation to be able to validate this information.

Social Media Activities and Effects on Society and Politics

One way of exploring the potential of social media is to have a look at direct impacts of online activism on society and politics. The activists come up with concrete examples about who they influence and where one can see impacts of their activities.

> "We influence the local government of Tigray, to… not to rule Tigray from Addis, from the capital of Ethiopia, but to rule Tigray from the capital of Tigray, Mekelle. We also influence the ruling party of Tigray, the TPLF, to bring nationalists to power than Ethiopianists". (Interview 1)

This participant is convinced that the local government, on a national level, can push along ideas such as much wanted federalist structures in Ethiopia. In some situations, social media is also used as a tool to pressure the people in power. If they do not act as the activists want, the activists will oppose agreements or meetings and post about it in their own interest to disturb the actions of the local leaders, as it has already happened.

> "Two months ago, there was one issue, one journalist, I think from Addis came to Tigray to make a documentary, documentary film. She was, she didn't have enough knowledge about the Tigrayan culture, Tigrayan tradition, even the Tigrayan, uhm, TPLF history […]. TPLF history is our history, so the TPLF officials had an agreement to make the documentary by her, then we opposed that, uhm, that situation, and they cut the agreement. So, it has an effect, our posts, it can change some, uhm, challenges." (Interview 8)

Another respondent gives insights in what he undertook to make the government release prisoners:

> "Everyone says, they should release prisoners in Oromia, ok and I posted this, and I openly ask to a government official in Facebook to release. Then he gave me a call, he told me to bring him a list of prisoners and the place of imprisonment, I posted it in Facebook, I asked the people to give me the list of prisoners, I received it in Facebook, I gave it to the official, and he released them. So, it has become serious." (Interview 4)

The impacts have become "serious", and the interactive nature of Facebook allowed this participant to directly talk to a government official and at the same time to ask his audience about their urgent issues. This example demonstrates that even the followers can have an influence on the political actions by interacting with the activists through social media.

There have been other cases where the posting of the activists had consequences for the offline.

> "I know many people who used to oppose me to… because of my nationalist, uhm, feelings. Now they're just supporting me and they are writing things about what I write, and copy from previous years, so, I think I'm the winner (laughs)." (Interview 7)

The activists win, because they can use Facebook and all the other platforms to their advantage in their political struggles insofar as former adversaries become friends. They get encouraged to further pursue their goals, not just to rearrange political structures but to found their own media companies, for example.

> "Just, I want to have my own… free media, it is for uses of anybody. Anybody can… can speak, anybody can entertain, anybody can express his feeling." (Interview 6)

Being able to express what he wants is the final goal of this participant, not just online on social media, but within a formal framework of a medium, without having to fear consequences, as how the situation is now. In addition, he hopes that everybody will have this possibility one day.

The perception of the activists that social media has a big potential in reaching political change in Ethiopia becomes partially apparent in the examples they mention. What has to be considered is that these impacts have not at all led to any major political change such as the independence of Tigray from the rest of Ethiopia, or stronger federalist structures in the country, as the activists demand. Previous cases of protest movements like the Arab Spring in 2011 show (van Dijk & Hacker 2018: 131) that there is also not very strong evidence that change will come

soon and as fast as the activists maybe imagine, if ever. Surely the potential to express these ambitions became possible to a greater extent than in pre-social media times, however, and even if these digital technologies have the ability to empower people in that sense, actual power relations in the country do not shift (Dahlgren 2013: 33). Only if it is possible to mobilize people to action outside of online spaces will there maybe be opportunities to take further steps towards social change (Morozov 2011: 19).

The online and offline, as the discussion visualizes, are closely related. The activists count on their followers and on other activists in their personal networks as a source of information and exchange of strategies and ideas with the purpose of having the biggest impact possible, outside of the online platforms. What is more, and what is specific for Ethiopia is that the offline gets a special meaning when the online is not available, when the internet gets shut down by the government, or when people have no access due to the low internet penetration. People help themselves with calling their information sources and with sharing what they read online to their friends and families, which has the effect that news spread within the society despite the fact that a lot of people are not connected. It is this offline agency that makes social media to a strong tool for the activists in Tigray as well as for other activists in the whole country, and results are partially visible on a smaller political scale, not just online but especially offline, for example when prisoners are released or agreements are cancelled due to social media activities.

5. Conclusion

The present research attempted to investigate practices of social media activists in Tigray, the northernmost region of Ethiopia, in order to understand the role of digital technologies in connection to recent political processes. Thereby, the particular focus was laid on social media and political participation as well as questions of identity which are highly relevant in Ethiopia, in detail questions about ethnicity and nationalism and online nation-building. Placing the present case in an Ethiopian context integrates this research into the wider field of African media studies and helps expanding knowledge about the utilization of social media on this continent as well as to reconsider concepts and definitions, which usually emerged from a Western background. Understandings about digital technologies cannot simply be transferred to and applied in Ethiopia because of predominant political and societal conditions as well as in regard to history and identity aspects, which are to a big extent different from Western norms and backgrounds. Political circumstances and fewer development of technology leads to low internet penetration and therefore less accessibility of digital media, which certainly has an influence in researching the impact of social media in political protests. On the other side, the potential of revolutionizing the political system in authoritarian systems can be regarded as higher in comparison to stable democracies where citizens have basic democratic rights and possibilities to get involved, at least in fair elections, which is not necessarily given in Ethiopia.

The Potential of Social Media – New Opportunities and Online Nation-Building

Social media gets its particular value in that ordinary citizens have discovered a new chance to participate in the political discourse, which they have not been able to, in this extent, through traditional media such as newspapers, radio or television. Censorship and strains of governmental control of the media are still present in Ethiopia, something that is harder to enforce with digital media technologies. Online platforms as new social environments offer new opportunities to foster social relationships through its very interactive nature, and enables the Tigrayan activists to reach a vast amount of people in a short time. In how far the tool of social media is able to support political change is however questionable (cf. Dahlgren 2013, van Dijk & Hacker 2018), even though the activists are generally very optimistic in that sense. One reason that lets research doubt believing in this effect is that social media can be beneficial not only for ordinary people but also for governments and officials for the cause of closer surveillance of its citizens, for example, which can even lead to a deterioration of democracy (van Dijk 2018: 1). Yet, social media makes political participation through media easier and

accessible for a bigger public. It can best be described as a tool for changing discourses and political communication as well as for reaching small-scale impacts in society, such as the release of political prisoners or putting pressure on the local government to cancel agreements. The activists highly appreciate this rather new opportunity for them to participate and see reams of benefits in their attempt to protest against power institutions.

By interviewing the activists as individual active users of social media, it became evident that they, with their personal profiles and backgrounds, become intertwined in a bigger political context. Generally speaking, and also outside of online platforms, the personal and the political is firmly rooted in our everyday lives and not something that can be separated from each other (Highfield 2016: 39). This can in particular be exemplified with social media, which actually are "non-political spaces" (ibid.: 30), but platforms for social interaction of any kind. The personal in the form of contacting friends and sharing pictures meets the contributions to wider political discussions and the effort to influence the elites for a better future perspective. All of this content comes together on the same platforms and it works with the same mechanisms (Highfield 2016: 39). The activists expose themselves as individuals who have a clear stance towards political issues, and due to the interactive characteristics of social media, are able to exchange ideas and beliefs with other activists and their audiences. Political participation through social media gets a "private tenor everybody understands" (Van Dijk & Hacker 2018: 65) and gives the discussion a personal note.

Of special importance in the context of Tigray, as a major finding of the present study, is the notion of a Tigrayan identity and, in this regard, a strong nationalist thinking and the urge to "fix" and defend the nation against the outside. Through the interactive nature of social media, the online platforms can be seen as amplifiers for this concept of Tigrawaynet, to term it as the activists do. Identity questions are actively discussed by individuals, the activists and also by their followers through commenting and sharing content, which makes this collective identity, this feeling of being a person from Tigray, being "continuously activated and reinforced" (Milan 2015: 896). Therefore, online platforms become "one of the main meaning-making machines of our time" (ibid.: 897). Specific methods to further push forward this online nation-building are the utilization of frameworks in dedicating all the posts to strengthen the Tigrayan nation and to face possible threats and dangers which want to sweep away traditions and make history forgotten. In addition, the activists mainly use Tigrinya, the local language, to transmit their messages, and show themselves as Tigrayan people through their profile pictures and cover photos. This invigorates this sense of belonging together and working towards the same

goals. In how far the followers really engage in social media activities can be a matter of further research by studying audiences and exploring in what ways they use and engage in social media.

The question about the potential of pushing along this community building from online to offline spaces and having an actual impact on the "offline" society through digital media can only be answered through the activists' eyes. In their opinion the potential which results out of using social media as a tool for political participation and, eventually, political change, is big. Having a real impact starts with the belief of being able to have one, which makes them feel empowered, a circumstance that was noticeable in many statements throughout all the interviews. The fact that the Horn of Africa has one of the lowest internet penetrations worldwide does not stop them thinking in this way, due to various reasons. They can observe direct consequences and results of their writing, for example in political decisions that are taken. What is more, the communal way of living together in Ethiopia supports the dissemination of online news even to people with no access to the web, a circumstance that has to be considered in discussions about the role and value of social media in Tigray. These findings illustrate how online and offline spaces merge into each other and that it is not possible anymore to draw a clear line between them (Dahlgren 2013: 33), also in Ethiopia where the majority of the people are actually left out of the online context due to the low internet penetration.

The Bigger Picture – Social Media Practices in an African Context

This thesis, in a bigger picture, emphasises that social media activists from Tigray have gotten new opportunities to participate in political discourses through digital technologies, in a country where traditional media is largely controlled by the government. Even though it is rather unlikely that political change will actually happen, according to previous research, the value of social media, for the involved actors themselves, is big. They get the chance to raise their voices for causes that matter to them, and they can be sure to be heard to the extent that bringing these online spaces fully under control is nearly impossible for the authorities. The activists have a strong belief in that they have the power, together with the support they get from their followers, to change the current situation to their advantage, and only this aspect makes social media to an important tool for them. They do not get discouraged by censorship, Internet shutdowns or by the low internet penetration in Ethiopia, because they know the cultural habits of Tigrayans living not an individual but a social life with much everyday interaction where issues get discussed, also issues from social media. This example together with this nationalist note of that online activism is mainly about marking and protecting ethnic territory as well as

reinforcing nationalist sentiments and feelings of belonging is underlining the importance of embedding the case in an African media context. It gives us the chance to recognise cultural and political circumstances that differ from Western understandings of how media within these circumstances work. This research adds to the demand of having more studies with a qualitative approach in order to find out about social media practices and, in general, media engagement of Africans (Willems & Mano 2017: 2). As it was mentioned at an earlier stage, the findings of this study cannot be in any way generalised to the whole continent in that the specific scope is the Ethiopian context.

As a matter of course, I have not got the temerity to give a prognosis about further political perspectives in Ethiopia, since there exists a great uncertainty about how the political landscape will develop in the near future. Mobilizing opinions is only one step in the process of achieving a system change, and the question is if the activists manage to push along these opinions "into a next phase of struggle where it can have political impact" (Dahlgren 2013: 20). Participation in decision-making processes by people outside of political institutions, as often claimed by research in looking at impacts of social media and political engagement, continues to be a difficult undertaking (van Dijk & Hacker 2018: 4). What can be said for sure is what the activists want to reach and what they hope for. On the one hand, the regional sovereignty to protect and maintain their Tigrayan cultural traditions and values is particularly meaningful to them as well as having this freedom of expressing their thoughts no matter what. On a bigger scale, many wish for being recognised by the international community in their aspiration to become independent from Ethiopia, the supreme goal for the majority of the political activists in Tigray, in a peaceful way, if possible. Despite various violent incidents all over the country, no actual armed conflict has erupted yet, the "war" is so far being fought on social media. Nevertheless, Ethiopia finds itself in a less stable situation than in other times, also because other regions in the country struggle with similar issues and have similar opinions about the central government. Further research about social media and nationalist sentiments in Ethiopia could insofar catch up on different motivations of activists in other parts of the country for the purpose of deepening the understanding of the possibility of nation-building with the help of the Internet in this specific context.

One more uttermost concluding remark about the bloggers in Tigray can be made at this place. Despite the uncertainty of their actual influence on society and political change as well as dangers and risks they are facing because of their activism, they will not stop, whatever will happen in the future. Their strong believes in what they are doing is right for changing the

political landscape of Tigray and Ethiopia is the driving motivation. Social media, in the end, represents an empowering tool in giving these people a chance to speak, and, eventually and hopefully, to be heard.

> "I mean, if they want to stop me, I will not stop. If they arrest me for five months, I will start writing the day I'm released from the prison, because I am writing for a purpose." (Interview 2)[11]

[11] In May 2020, two months after conducting the interviews, this blogger has been investigated and kept under arrest for a short time again. His message that he posted on Facebook was as follows: "The 'shadow' body has conveyed its message loud and clear. And I say this – *never will I bend down*, and never will the status be static."

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Appendix

A) Sampling

The following interviews all took place in Mekelle, the regional capital city of Tigray, within the first two weeks of March 2020. The participants are all male and between 28 and 37 years old.

- Interview 1: 03/03/2020 (pilot interview)
- Interview 2: 05/03/2020
- Interview 3: 06/03/2020
- Interview 4: 09/03/2020
- Interview 5: 09/03/2020
- Interview 6: 09/03/2020
- Interview 7: 10/03/2020
- Interview 8: 12/03/2020
- Interview 9: 13/03/2020
- Interview 10: 14/03/2020

I decided to include the pilot interview into the analysis, because I saw that the interview guide was working and, apart for some small changes, mainly in how to ask the questions in another way, nothing was changed for the rest of the interviews. What is more, the participant gave me some valuable insights which I think are important to consider in the analysis.

B) Consent Form

Consent for Participation in Interview Research

Researcher: Mirjam Zehnder
Program: MSc Media and Communication Studies, Lund University, Sweden

This master thesis seeks to develop further knowledge about the role of bloggers and social media in political protests. The case study concentrates on the examination of the political and cultural situation in Tigray, Ethiopia, and the focus will specifically be on processes of identity and meaning-making.

Interviews are carried out only for the purpose of this master thesis, without any further utilization. The researcher will not identify the participant by any name in the analysis when using information obtained from this interview. The participant can choose to not answer questions or to stop the interview for any reason at any time. With his/her signature, the participant agrees that the interview will be audio-recorded.

If you agree to join this study, please fill in the information and sign your name below. Bet'aemi yekeniyeley!

_____
Full name

_____
Age

_____
Participant's signature

_____
Place and Date

C) Interview Guide

Introduction

- What was the last thing you posted on Facebook?
- What are the most recent issues that you were blogging about?
- How many followers do you have?
- How often do you post on social media?
- Do you have another background in media, other than your social media activities as a blogger?

Media / Political / Cultural Context of Ethiopia

- Do you remember the very first thing you posted about as a blogger? When was that?
- Why did you become a social media blogger? Do you have a role model?
- What is the goal that you want to reach with your blogging?
- Who exactly do you want to reach? How do you try to reach your target audience? (language, for example)
- Were there any key moments (in politics) where your community was growing?
- Can you think of other people who got in trouble because of their activities on social media? Have you ever felt scared doing this job?
- Can you remember moments where you had to deal with fake news? How do you react to that?

The Role of Social Media

- What benefits do social media give you for doing your work? Any advantages / disadvantage you could name?
- How do you see the importance of social media compared to other media in Ethiopia?
- There are many people in Ethiopia, also in Tigray, who are not connected to the internet or are not active on Facebook. How do you deal with this circumstance?
- How much does the situation with the internet/censorship in Ethiopia compromise your work? And how do you react to that?

(Cultural/Collective) Identity

- What is Tigrawaynet ("Tigray-ness") for you? What does it mean for you? What specific things make Tigray special? And, in contrast to all this: what is Ethiopian-ness for you?
- You've just mentioned these different characteristics/attributes about being a person from Tigray. How do these things become visible on your social media channels? How do you represent Tigrawaynet on your social media platforms?
- How do you try to convince your audience that what you say is right and what others say is maybe not?
- What do you think, why do people follow you? (trust/legitimization…)

- What impact you think does your blogging have in Tigray (strengthening regional identity)?

Summing up / Conclusions / Future Perspectives

- Where do you see yourself in 5 years? Still as a blogger? As someone else?
- Where do you think Tigray will be in 5 years?
- (Where do you see Ethiopia in 5 years? → if they don't mention it in the question before…)
- Anything else you would like to add, that I haven't asked you, that you think is important for me to know?

D) Example of an Interview Transcript

Interview 1, 3rd March 2020, Mekelle, Tigray

Q. What was the last thing you posted on Facebook?
Mmmh, my last post today… yeah, I posted a story of this guy, who is from Tigray by family, but who was born and raised in Addis, who is facing stereotype because of his Tigrayan identity, in the last two years specifically, after the new government come to power, so that was my last post. And the story is about that guy who faces lots of stereotypes and discrimination based on his identity, especially when Abiy came to power, by his friends who grew up together in Addis, that was my last post.

Q. What are the most recent issues in general that you were blogging about? There were a lot of things going on in Tigray lately.
Fortunately, we are doing this interview one week after Lekatit 11, that… Lekatit 11 is the beginning of the armed struggle for the liberation of Tigray in 1967 according to Ethiopian calendr, and it's I think 1974 according to your calendar, so we celebrated the 45th anniversary of the beginning of the armed struggle, which tackled the Dergue government in 1991. So, the biggest issue, actually, not only the current issue but the biggest issue this year, or maybe in the last 2-3 years has been this Lekatit 11 anniversary celebration, because of the current political situation in the country and because of, every five years, 40th, 45th, then 50th, so because of that, we have been celebrating it not only for one month, we have been celebrating it for like the last two, three months, starting from October.

Q. So, you prepared properly for it?
Yeah, we have been preparing, celebrating, so that was the biggest issue, exactly, and after that, before two days, we celebrated the anniversary of the victory of Adwa, in Adwa, fortunately I have been travelling to Adwa, I've been there, so that were the recent issues, yeah.

Q. How many followers do you have? Do you know that?
Yes of course, it's Facebook that tells you every day, so yeah. By now I have 5000 friends and 50'000 followers, so it's totally 55'000… friends in my Facebook, and then I have 18.5 thousand over Twitter, which I am active, and… 18'500 followers onto it. That's it.

Q. Quite a lot I would say!
Of course, yeah, a little bit.

Q. How often do you post on social media?
These days, almost throughout the day (laughs). The thing is, I have to post when I get an issue, so in the last two years, specifically in the last two, three years, there are issues almost every hour in the country, so I have to cope up. So, recently I'm almost full time blogger, or full time social activist, social media activist, so I post very much, that's what I can say, I post every hour, every two hours, three hours, there is not a day in the last two years where I skipped the posting. That's it.

Q. Do you have another background in media, other than your social media activities as a blogger?
Yeah, uhm, of course I've been in social media for almost 13 years, 14 years, starting at my college years. But I was kind of attendant that… yeah, this time, at least myself, but I have the rule of following, reading and listening others, that was it, as such. And participating, and leading in the last two, up to three years. On social media. But I used to give interviews, I used to write for some newspapers, at college age ten years back, eleven years back. That's it.

Q. Why did you become a social media blogger in the first place?
I have had my own concerns in Ethiopian politics, starting from childhood, and in the last eight, nine years, after college graduation, when I was living in Addis, I was closely following after Ethiopian politics, the current situations, and I'm not always happy about how the state is running, I'm not always happy about how things are getting… especially after the end of the armed struggle, I'm not happy about how the government is practicing the things in the constitution, what's been done at the constitutional level is good, but what's on the ground is completely different, that's how I claim. So, I was not happy, and then, on the top of this, when the current government holds power two years back, April 2017, I think… 2017 or 18? 18, yeah, 18, April, yeah, yeah, exactly.

Q. Yes, 2018, that's when I was in Nairobi with you!
Exactly, we have been to Nairobi, fortunately, yeah, interesting! So, starting that time, things get worse than they were. Actually, I can say only few people noticed that things were getting worse, because all the country, the media, everything says oh this is a kind of change for this country, and good time is coming, reforms are coming, like that, but I used to know the people who are in power now, even the Prime Minister, I used to know him closely because I worked, kind of project that he give to me, so I knew the intention, so my first reservation was, the government was not practicing the constitution as it is, but I notice the current government, they don't even accept the constitution. So I decided to take my share of… the current situation, so I chose to participate over social media and influence people the way around, yeah.

Q. Do you remember the very first thing you posted about as a blogger? When was that?
Mmh, I don't exactly remember the exact post, but I remember the… the benchmark, or the situation that pushed me to became completely full-time blogger. So, the chief of army of the country was assassinated at his home, daytime, I think it was the, at June 2019, yes, it was that. So, at time, I, fortunately the chief of the army was my neighbour, at my home in Tigray, I used to know him closely, and he was assassinated for, I claim he was assassinated by forces which are affiliated by the government, so, I used actually to participate at social media not as full time as I am now, because I was in IT profession, working for another company, starting that day when he was assassinated and, I was almost sure where we are heading to, because the current government wants to make kind of changes they want, for that to have these changes they have to assassinate people who are affiliated with the previous government, like the chief of general who had been part of the armed struggle of Tigrawayan liberation. So, he get assassinated, and I was almost sure where we are heading to, which we are right now, so I decided to become full-time blogger.

Q. What is the goal that you want to reach with your blogging?
Yeah, interesting. The final goal is, actually, the… I would like to see autonomous Tigray, and finally an independent Tigray, in… final. Ok, but the direct goal is for other Tigrayans and Ethiopians to feel the feeling of the people of Tigray, and then for the Tigrayans to show them kind of solidarity, that we the elite understand their struggle, their need, and we are pushing towards… the independence of the people of Tigray with our helping the other people of Ethiopia. Yeah, that's the immediate goal, but the final goal is to see autonomous Tigray within Ethiopia, or, in long term, an independent Tigray from Ethiopia. That's, yeah….

Q. Who exactly do you want to reach? You mentioned that you are the elite and you want the other people to see this Tigrayan-ness, somehow. So, who is your audience?
Yeah, interesting, my audience is primarily the people of Tigray, and secondary the people of Ethiopia who are not Tigrayans, or not Tigrinya-speakers. So, in every opportunity, what I'd like to, to speak for is, for the people of Tigray, to make them feel that we are struggling towards the need of our people, including me, and, for the other people in Ethiopia who are not Tigrayans, who are not Tigrinya-speakers, I would like to tell them that, the, the need of… the people of Tigray even more, and then, we would like not to have other people, but we'd like to stay autonomous for, for ourselves. So, both are my audience but primarily, that's why I always write in Tigrinya, for the things who are Tigrayans, but I also write more in Amharic and English for the other community in Ethiopia to understand what we need, and then to cope up with our interests… yeah, that's it, yeah.

Q. Were there any key moments where your community was growing?
Oh yeah, most of the time I do participate in events, events that impact society directly. There have been, there has been two or three events that… ok, there was, last year, there was clashes at universities, ethnic clashes, so, one Tigrayan was killed in a university that is located in the Amhara region, so, in Tigray, they have to pay back that… thing, and then they killed another Amhara student in Tigray, so, the clashes get to their, uhm, climax. And then we have to, we have to secure the Tigray students who are studying in Amhara, so, I, me and my friends has to make kind of committee that works on exceeding the Tigray students who are studying in Amhara. So we have to collect fans from the society, and then we have to arrange transportation and security there, so I have been part of this committee, I was leading this committee, that was one time where my followers grew so fast. And then, few months back, I think it was around September or October, there was locust invasion in East Africa, specifically in Ethiopia, so there has been mass locust in the farmers' locations, so we have to make another committee that fights, protects this locus fight... attacking farmlands. And in that time we still have to collect fans from the society and the public bank account, that was another incident where my followers grow very fast. And then recently for this celebration of Lekatit 11, me and my friends made a website, named lekatit11.com, which explains the history of the armed struggle starting from 1974 until 1991 where the armed struggle ends and the Tigrayan fighters take over Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. So in Lekatit 11 celebration, my followers also grow some. I can name these three events, then, yeah, I forget to mention the fourth one where Seare was killed, the chief of army was killed. I think I was the first or maybe the second to break the news, because, as I told you he was my neighbour, so a relative of him told me there was gunshot at home, our home, so what's happened, they have to run and check at Seare, he told me, and then I, I was not in Ethiopia actually, so I break the news, and then internet cut in Ethiopia after two or three hours after his death, so almost everyone in Ethiopia heard the, in

Tigray especially, heard the news from my Facebook post, and that, when I came back after two weeks, when Internet came back in Ethiopia, my followers almost doubled by that time. So that's four incidents that I can quote, yeah.

Q. Have you ever felt scared doing this job?
Of course, of course I'm scared. Especially when I'm out of Tigray I get scared a lot. I came back to Ethiopia at July, end of July 2019 from Maputo, so by the time when I , where I, when I was kind of back to Addis I was a little bit scared of the current situation, And now, yeah I'm living here in Tigray, in Mekelle, yeah I can travel to Addis, I can, I can stay there, but I'm not as free as yesterday, I'm not as free as few months back last year, cause at the moment I'm exposing a lot of bad things about the government, so I'm a little bit scared, yes, obvious.

Q. Can you think of other people who got in trouble because of their activities on social media?
Of course, yeah. Yeah, a lot of friends of me are getting harassed at Addis, yeah. There was this journalist who… he was harassed last month, they… they bind him from travelling from Addis to Mekelle, yeah, and he has to, to avoid plane transportation. After one week or two weeks he sneaked through bus and came to Tigray. Yeah, there are a lot of stories, and there are, I know, I know some bloggers who are living here and who can't even go to Addis in the last two years. I don't know he'll ask if he's… there's a friend of me whose dad passed away a week back, he can't travel to Dire Dawa for the funeral of his dad, yeah. There are stories, yeah, he's one of the prominent bloggers in this country, yeah. So, there are such incidents, of course, yeah.

Q. Can you remember moments where you had to deal with fake news? How do you react to that?
Oh yeah yeah yeah, yeah, I deal a lot with fake news, fortunately there is not a single day where I posted a fake news. It's because… ok, number one I'm from IT background, so I used some IT techniques to check if the news is fake or not. Basically, if there… most of fake news came with photoshop, so there is a technique to figure out if a picture is photoshopped or not, so I use this technique, number one, and the other thing is, because I have a lot of followers, I can check multiple sources, yeah, there is this, my personal law that I say, three out of five, I ask five people for something, if three of them confirm me I go ahead, but if not, if only two out of five, I don't post it, that's just a personal rule, so there was not a time that I posted or I spread fake news, even I work on other fake news to people, yeah, even yesterday I do one fake news alert, this Ethiopian state media make a news about the victory of Adwa as if the government sells a congratulatory message to the Ethiopian people, but it was just a face… a fake page, but this is the state media and others have been reporting that news, so I was doing fake news alerts to my followers. Yeah, so I'm… I'm fighting fake news actually.

Q. What benefits do social media give you for doing your work? Any advantages / disadvantage you could name?
Uhm, basically I'm fighting for my interests, that's the most important thing. It's a platform that's helping me spread, uhm, spread the news on the ground, the situation on the ground to the community and to the international media, especially over Twitter, I can reach a lot of embassies, big media people, international community, I can, I can reach through Twitter. So, the most important thing or, the biggest advantage that I'm getting from social media participation is, I can, I can push towards my interests in, to my people. That's the most

important thing. Other thing, there is nothing personal that I get, but I, I believe we are in deep struggle, I bel…, honestly speaking I believe we are in war, that's how I explain the situation, so, it's the best platform that we are using to win over our enemies who are trying to attack us, that's how I see that.

Q. There are many people in Ethiopia, also in Tigray, who are not connected to the internet or are not active on Facebook. How do you deal with this circumstance?
Exactly, yeah. Even, when I told you, few months back when we're fighting this locust invasion, we, we work, with the farmers who don't even know about the internet, but we are using this platform , Facebook or Twitter, the social media platform… so the thing is, it, I believe it's all about the elite, in society it's all about the elite, so we spread the kind of information, what we want, over this social media platform, and then there are people who are living with the farmers, with the people who are disconnected from the internet, but they meet them in social events like uhm… nassewa, where people gather to drink alcohol, in different social events, so that's elites, the people we are trying to reach, and then these people do spread the information in other platforms, over church or something. So I feel like it's all about pushing your… your message to the elite and then the elite can use other platforms. It's all about spreading the news. So that, there's no… the other thing is, most of our society they follow radio, in villages, and then we shape the people who are making the radio, uhm, messages, yeah, exactly. So, indirectly, the people, the journalists in the radio stations, we influence them and then they influence the society, that's how we are doing.

Q. So social media is kind of one important piece in the whole media landscape?
Of course, indirectly. Yeah, exactly, of course. Not only… in Ethiopia, no, it's the most important thing, not one of, the most, the leading one is social media, exactly. Because, the people in another, in mainstream media, they are much influenced by social media, most of them report social media news as it is. As I told you, the state media made a news yesterday, and there is also kind of fake… Facebook page, that has a message of Eritrean government to Ethiopian people, and then the state media of the country, the state TV, reported it as it is. So, social media is now playing a critical role because of the weakness of the journalists and we are meeting that gap to spread our own message.

Q. There's not only the limited internet connection of people, but also censorship or internet shutdowns in Ethiopia. How much does this situation compromise your work? And how do you react to that?
Yes, uhm, since the government, the current government came to power, there has been seven times interruption of internet, seven times they cut, completely cut the internet, so, in the situations we just keep silent. We can't do anything there. But, because of the international community, the internet cut doesn't stay, it doesn't stay more than a week or two weeks, and then the government takes it back, brings it back. So, most… the biggest influence is, they block the social media websites only, so, for that, I think now almost everyone outside IT is aware of Virtual Private Network softwares, VPN's, almost every, everyone has the software, so every, so the government cannot block the VPN, so that's our biggest tool now. And as I told you, because I am from IT background, I do some… tune, of course yeah. And the other thing is, on the last two years, I spend much of my time out of Ethiopia, so I can fight from there, by getting informations through phone and then posting, but as you see, the last seven months now, I'm

here in Tigray, so… we are fighting with the government censorship and internet poverty, we are still fighting, but still, we are winning!

Q. You have different platforms that you are active on, right? Which ones do you exactly use, and for what reason? Do you use Facebook for other reasons than Twitter, for example? Do you post different stuff on different media?

Uhm, yes, I, I use them for different purpose and, uhm, different content on different platforms, and… it depends on my audience. Most of my audience in Facebook are, uhm, people with no leadership, people, ordinary citizens, most of them. Most of my followers on Twitter are officials, in international communities, embassies, something like that. So, I don't go and post over Twitter 'oh, tomorrow is Lekatit 11, please come and join us' or something, I post kind of, news or articles who, which I want the international community to get aware of, which I would like to influence the officials, leaders, but in Facebook, I, I mostly engage with events, local events, which I would like to aff.. which affects the local community. Uhm, and in YouTube and Instagram, I go a little bit to multimedia things, pictures and something. So I different, I post different messages based on the audience that are in these different platforms, yeah.

Q. What is Tigrawaynet ("Tigrayan-ness") for you? What does it mean for you to be a person from Tigray?

There's this big debate in Ethiopia, in, basically in the formation of the state of Ethiopia, starting from thousands of years, I think from the 4th century or something, there has been a government in Tigray, which is called the Axumite civilization, from, it begins, I think it begins at 4th century or something, I don't know, we have to refer to history. But there has been a Tigrayan government from the beginning, before the Ethiopian state was make, or, before the Ethiopian country was established. So, we claim, Ethiopia is a kind of… state that is formed by different nation, different nations, so these nations deserve a national state where they own and they determine their own future, with their own governments. But we want this Ethiopian nation, a multi-national state, where different national states make a big nation. So, how do we, how do we call the Tigrayan, tigrayawian, Tigray nation, or Oromo nation, Amhara nation, Sidama nation… each of us has our own completely different culture, language, historical background, interest, so, for, for people with completely different interests and historical background, and language and culture, they can't have kind of unitary government, which can rule from a specific area to, to this big country. So, I will prefer for, as I told you, we have our own everything, we have our own… everything including our own government. That's how we feel the tigrayawinet, that's how we feel. Uhm, I cannot say I am the same with another Ethiopian like Oromo national or Ethiopian, Amhara national because, it's not like the same for me with another, Kenyan or, someone from Saudi Arabia because we completely share different things. But as a citizens of one country, we may share some, things of the country but not, kind of, identity. So we are with different identities, but in one country. We would like to completely keep that identity, because if we… ok, this is what happened in the last one hundred, two hundred years, there has been rulers from the Amhara and from other ethnic groups in the country, so, what they want is, they would like to influence their own identity over the people of Tigray and then through time, the identity of the people of Tigray completely… it has been getting to its weakest point on the last one hundred people, if, that's the main reason our fathers go to armed struggle, to fight against the Dergue, because there was not education in our language, we were not allowed to sing, and to exercise our culture, so we were supposed to exercise others' culture in our land, in our society, now not… that's what we are fighting hard,

to keep our national, uhm, qualities. Yeah, that's… to keep our own, our Tigray sovereign, whether it's with Ethiopia or not, but to keep kind of sovereign, eshi.

Q. So, what are these qualities that you were talking about exactly?
The Tigrayan quality are, they are, as I told you, our language, Tigrinya, our culture, and when we get into culture it's going to be our history, as I told you starting from Axumite civilization, until the current, the Tigrayan government in the state of Tigray, uhm… yeah, another thing is, in countries like Ethiopia you can't have a uniformed policy to administer all the people of Ethiopia together, because for example the community in Tigray may be a little bit civilized than the community in other part of the country. It's because there's availability of schools there, as I told you there has been thousands of years civilization, so you, we, I feel like we are waiting other people, because we have to be the same, but, and, the problem is, because we have got kind of unitary coalition, the same policy, to different… it can't work, it feels like having… so, that's another quality, I would… because we are a little bit theirs and a little bit civilized because of history. We can adapt a little bit faster than other people of the country, and we are hold back because of the other people, but… yeah, that's another problem.

Q. You've just mentioned these different characteristics/attributes about being a person from Tigray. How do you as a person represent Tigrawaynet, and how does it become visible on your social media channels?
Ok yeah. Uhm, physically I use our language to spread, you know, anything. So, I am, I'm indirectly working on promoting the language of the people of Tigray, which is I think the most important thing in building what's on identity, it's language, and other thing is, I become kind of sample, I don't know, I'm showing what the Tigrayan qualities are by getting used to our own culture, speaking about Tigray in every opportunity that I get, in fighting ideologies, historical ideologies that come to be a part of the history of Tigray and that come to take over the government of Tigray. So, I, I'm also participating in some civic societies as participant, who are working towards the advantage of Tigray, the benefits of Tigray. So, recently, I'm doing practically on the ground, the, even beyond social media, the qualities of Tigray, and then trying to influence our own society of course, and others as I mentioned before. Yeah.

Q. How do you try to convince your audience that what you say is right and what others say is maybe not? Do you have any tactics there?
Oh yeah, interesting, yes, interesting. This is… as I told you, in Ethiopia the, uhm, the biggest issue now is, there are people who believe in identity of their own nation, and there are other people who are against this, uhm, nat… national identity and who'd like to say only Ethiopian exists, only Ethiopia, there is no Tigray, there is no Amhara, people who claim we don't need an ethnic groups to be favoured, but we want one kind of identity. So, unfortunately, most of these people who wants the Ethiopian identity only, which doesn't exist, as to me, most of them practice one language, one culture, and this all have got only with one ethnic group. So number one we've been exposed that, big time, so that people who are looking for Ethiopian unity are only in favour of one specific ethnic group, so, that's one thing that is helping me convince my audience, by exposing the people who are against us, by exposing their true identity, that's one thing, other thing is as I told you, I never spread fake news, I'll do always try to come up with evidence, and I always try to refer the current level of the constitution of the country, I always try not to… fortunately the constitution of Ethiopia allows national groups to form their own

government, so I… I always quote the, the legal things in the constitution, so I have a good basis. Yeah, so far so good.

Q. What do you think, why do people follow you?
Yeah, by the way one thing I forget previously is, I also manage to contact with other, uhm, national forces, from other ethnic groups. We are demanding for autonomous state of Tigray, and other people are also demanding autonomous state of Oromia, autonomous state of Amhara, I have a very smooth relationship with these people. Yes, and then we manage to create a kind of, uhm, country that can respect our national states, that's why you always call multi-national states. Yeah, so, that's another thing that help me convince my… I'm not only in favour of Tigray, but in favour of other people who are demanding their own nation. Yeah, because we share similar goals, yeah, that's what I mean. What was the other thing?

Q. Why you think people started to follow you in the first place.
Yeah, the… ok, why do people follow me, number one I come up with , uhm, I come up with information a little bit faster, or a little bit ahead of others, so people are in demand of information, this is obvious, yeah, I, other thing is because of my background, I came up with a very good analysis, which I see from my audience, 'yeah, this is very true, very nice', yeah that's how they reply, most of them. So, because of the access of information that I have and because of the analysis I come up with, that my background help I mean. I believe my followers are following me, these two big reasons, yeah.

Q. What impact you think does your blogging have?
Oh yes, yes, it has got… big impact. It's not only mine of course, we share this impact with a lot of other activists in Tigray and all over the world who are working for Tigray. What kind of influence do we make so far… yeah, we have make big influence. Number one, we influence the local government of Tigray, to… not to rule Tigray from Addis, from the capital of Ethiopia, but to rule Tigray from the capital of Tigray, Mekelle. We also influence the ruling party of Tigray, the TPLF, to bring nationalists to power than Ethiopianists. We also influence every opportunity, every step that we participate for people to hold the Tigrayan flag to promote the, uhm, Tigrayan nationality. We also influence people in culture, like singers, people… actress, to come up with the Tigrayan nationalism, songs, movies, something like that. But basically we also influence the government in Ethiopia not to touch, not to attack the Tigrayans, because we may go even to full war, if they… because we have exercised our own government, there is no way we can get governed by external government, so we may go until… to guerrilla fighting. So, we have to send a message to… so, that's collected, uhm, works help us to influence both the local government and the central government to articulate the Tigrayan nationalism. We are also even sometimes personally, uhm, send message of… personally we attack people who come against our national interest, the Tigrayan interest, starting from our local governments to the central government, so, now almost everyone, every, every one of our representatives here in Tigray and in Addis, they are now following our posts and try to, yeah. That's big influence actually.

Q. Where do you see yourself in 5 years? Still as a blogger? As someone else? I know you Ethiopians don't plan that much, usually.
Interesting, and no no no, I plan, big time! I do plan, actually. I think it's… of course I have had plans even before few years, but this change comes so fast and then I came to… look, I got

these 50’000 followers, this big audience on the last eight months or one year. It’s not because I am special than the others but it’s because this interest have been inside me, but I hold it back for the… I was planning to come to politics in 22, 23, something like that.

Q. You yourself going into politics?
Yes of course, I would like to move from activism to politics, but not now, after some years, for, coming few years I would like to stay in activism, social activism. But this change comes so fast, so I come to get bold in activism with my own name and my identity. I see myself in five years… obviously in politics. Yeah, obviously, but I, as I told you, for the coming two, three years, I would like to stay completely in activism. And especially in media, I would like to support my activism with a… formal media. But, five years I would like to be part of political party, either from the existing political parties in Tigray, or maybe me and my friends can establish a new one. So, definitely I will, uhm, after establishing a media that can help me transfer my own ideology to the people, I will definitely get into politics, that’s how I see myself in five years. Maybe competing for chair in the parliament of Tigray… anyway in Tigray, anyway. That’s just a plan, I hope I will make it!

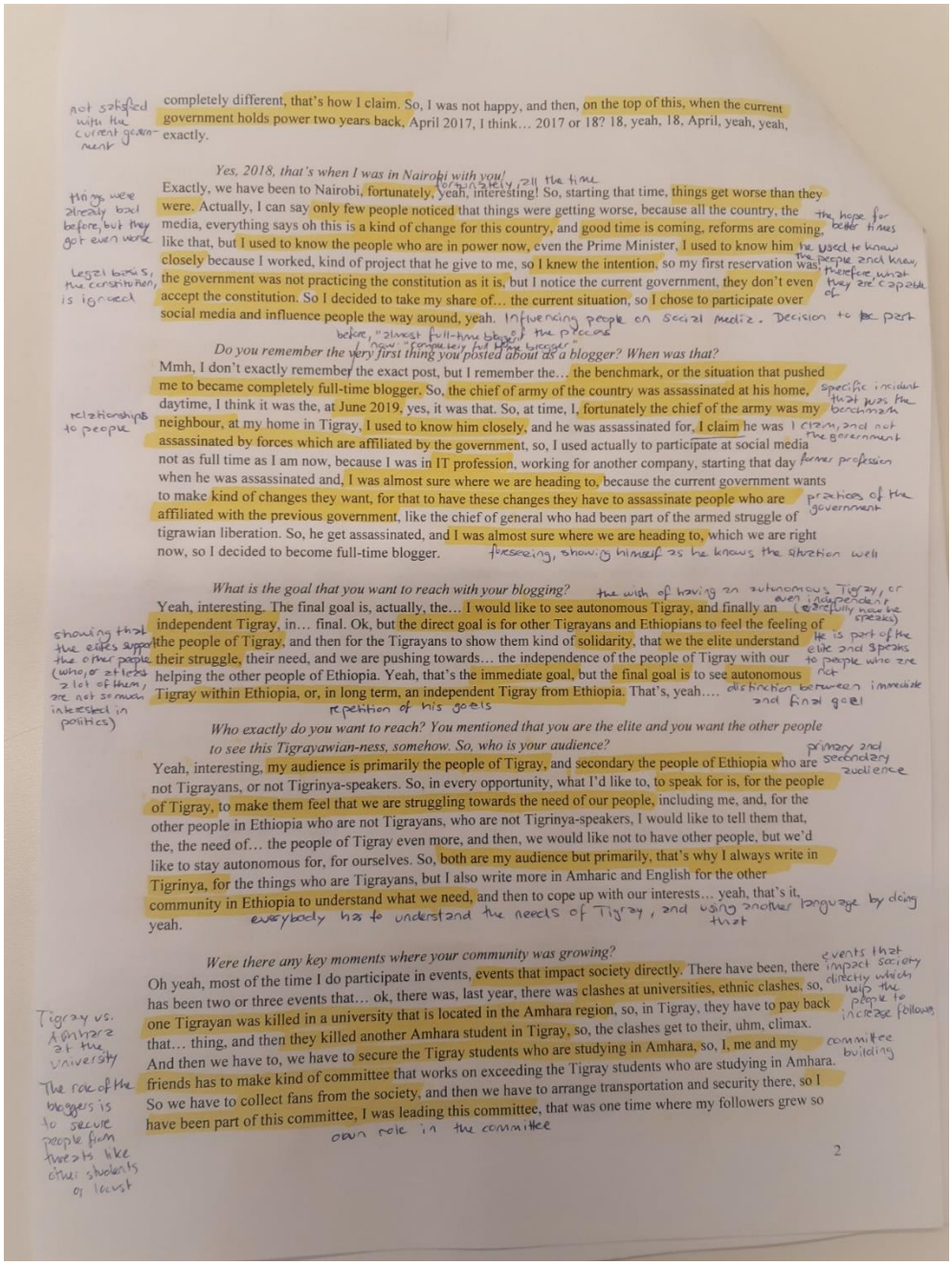
Q. Where do you think Tigray will be in 5 years?
Yeah, this is, soo… deep. Uhm, when… it’s, where do you see Tigray in five years, it’s not more like personal question, I can, I can only put scenarios… put scenarios on what happen. For my personal thing I can put my plans, but, in Tigray, I always think about it, deeply. I feel there are three scenarios that can happen in the coming five years. Actually not only five years, things will be obvious in the coming six months because we have national election, in six months, national election, 2020. One scenario is, if the central government, which we call it now Prosperity Party, the central government, by Mister Abiy, if he wins the upcoming election, there is big probability he can defeat the TPLF, which is the leading party in Tigray, and then they would like to govern Tigray from Addis, which we are fighting for. But this thing will bring a kind of civil war… between Tigray and Ethiopia because I don’t think the people here will be ok with government from Addis, like they didn’t allow 45 years back when people were guerrilla fighting against the Dergue. So the one scenario is, if the Prosperity Party in Addis wins the upcoming election, they will completely get in a kind of war, this is one scenario. The second is, if the gov… the current government in power, which we call Prosperity Party, looses power in the upcoming elections because of the other forces in Oromia and Amhara, not because of Tigray because Tigray only owns 38 years in parliament, so that’s a little bit insignificant compared to other forces in Ethiopia, so if the Prosperity Party or Prime Minister Abiy loose power in Addis, the people who are going to hold power are going to be the nationalists from other nations, from other ethnic groups. So what they demand is similar with our demand, so we may continue the current status quo, multi-national Ethiopia, but in a little bit more national states with a little bit sovereign power, a little bit more powerful than the central government. We would like to see a weak government in Addis, but strong national states in Ethiopia, that for the great Ethiopia, so we may get into that, that’s the second scenario. Unfortunately, the third is kind of civil war, all over the country, that’s what I see, which I give it more probability coming. If the current government in Ethiopia wants to continue without election, or with fake election, there will be a serious civil war all around Ethiopia. I believe in the situation Tigray will keep a little bit stable, because there is much dignity in our people here in Tigray, even if currently, in the last two years, there have been a lot of causalities, displacements, deaths in the country, as compared Tigray has been almost significant in displacement and in depts

throughout the last two years, so if, if the current government in Addis, which I think is not as powerful as the previous government, even though both are dictator governments, but the previous dictator government of EPRDF was a little bit more powerful at that time, this is kind of weak dictator that cannot even go out of the, uhm, capital, so if they try to move on without election or with a fake election, things will get into completely out of control situation, and then I think Tigray will keep a little bit stable, but with some, uhm, causalities, that's what I see in third. But, if we get to the third scenario, I think the final situation will be kind of a de-facto state, without an official recognition from the international community, so that's what I see in third. It will be one of the third points, I guess, yeah.

Q. All right, that's it, but maybe you have something more to add?
Yeah, I don't know, that's not… if that's a question or, suggestion, I don't know. We want the international community, and we want the people in the world to see Tigrayans beyond Addis. Yeah… it's not, I think Eritrea is a Tigrinya-speaking nation, officially, because there are a lot of Tigrinya speakers, but Tigrinya and the Tigrayan culture is more rooted in Tigray, more in Tigray than in any other nation with Tigrinya-speakers in it, but I feel like the international community has almost no knowledge of our struggle… It's, ok, I think it will end up like Somaliland. The people of Somaliland have been fighting throughout their history, but unfortunately, they are still unrecognized, because their struggle was not even recognized before 1991. That's my fear, we may end up like Somaliland, but even much worse, like the Kurds in Iraq, you know. The people of Kurds in Iraq are a little bit stable as compared to other people in Iraq, and, yeah, nobody cares and nobody gives a recognition because, yeah. So, before things get into out-of-control situation, I would like people in the world, especially the elites, in the world to get a little bit knowledge of us and our… our struggle, that's it. And I hope you help me with that.

E) Analysis

Coding



completely different, that's how I claim. So, I was not happy, and then, on the top of this, when the current government holds power two years back. April 2017, I think… 2017 or 18? 18, yeah, 18, April, yeah, yeah, exactly.

Yes, 2018, that's when I was in Nairobi with you!

Exactly, we have been to Nairobi, fortunately, yeah, interesting! So, starting that time, things get worse than they were. Actually, I can say only few people noticed that things were getting worse, because all the country, the media, everything says oh this is a kind of change for this country, and good time is coming, reforms are coming, like that, but I used to know the people who are in power now, even the Prime Minister, I used to know him closely because I worked, kind of project that he give to me, so I knew the intention, so my first reservation was: the government was not practicing the constitution as it is, but I notice the current government, they don't even accept the constitution. So I decided to take my share of… the current situation, so I chose to participate over social media and influence people the way around, yeah.

Do you remember the very first thing you posted about as a blogger? When was that?

Mmh, I don't exactly remember the exact post, but I remember the… the benchmark, or the situation that pushed me to became completely full-time blogger. So, the chief of army of the country was assassinated at his home, daytime, I think it was the, at June 2019, yes, it was that. So, at time, I, fortunately the chief of the army was my neighbour, at my home in Tigray, I used to know him closely, and he was assassinated for, I claim he was assassinated by forces which are affiliated by the government, so, I used actually to participate at social media not as full time as I am now, because I was in IT profession, working for another company, starting that day when he was assassinated and, I was almost sure where we are heading to, because the current government wants to make kind of changes they want, for that to have these changes they have to assassinate people who are affiliated with the previous government, like the chief of general who had been part of the armed struggle of tigrawian liberation. So, he get assassinated, and I was almost sure where we are heading to, which we are right now, so I decided to become full-time blogger.

What is the goal that you want to reach with your blogging?

Yeah, interesting. The final goal is, actually, the… I would like to see autonomous Tigray, and finally an independent Tigray, in… final. Ok, but the direct goal is for other Tigrayans and Ethiopians to feel the feeling of the people of Tigray, and then for the Tigrayans to show them kind of solidarity, that we the elite understand their struggle, their need, and we are pushing towards… the independence of the people of Tigray with our helping the other people of Ethiopia. Yeah, that's the immediate goal, but the final goal is to see autonomous Tigray within Ethiopia, or, in long term, an independent Tigray from Ethiopia. That's, yeah….

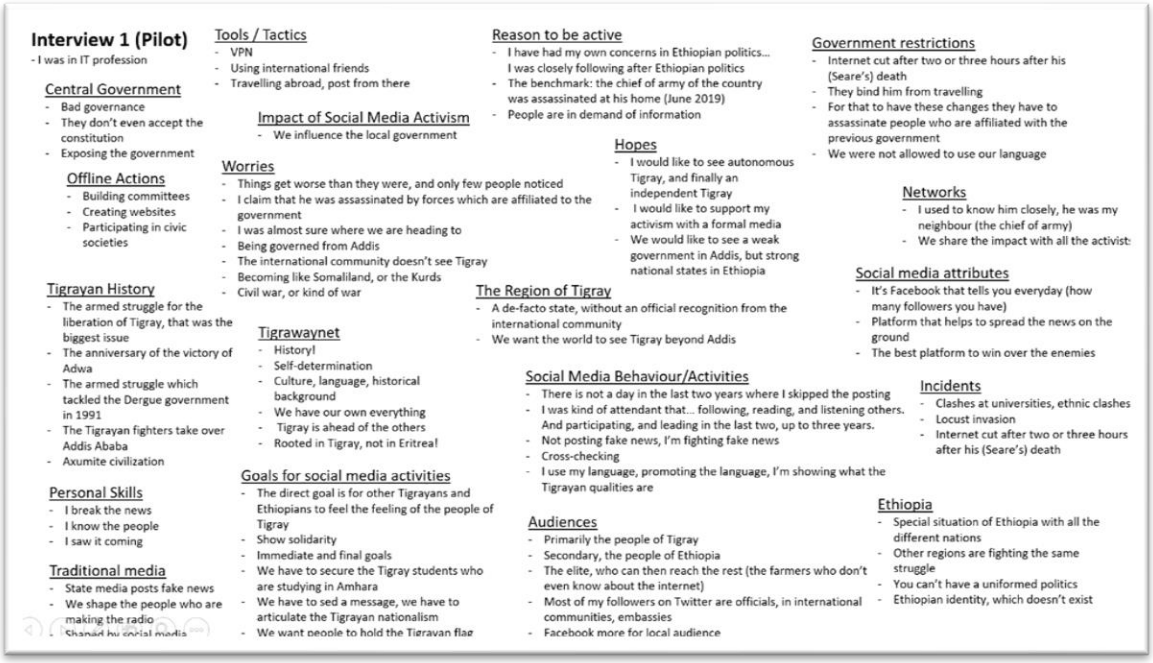
Who exactly do you want to reach? You mentioned that you are the elite and you want the other people to see this Tigrayawian-ness, somehow. So, who is your audience?

Yeah, interesting, my audience is primarily the people of Tigray, and secondary the people of Ethiopia who are not Tigrayans, or not Tigrinya-speakers. So, in every opportunity, what I'd like to, to speak for is, for the people of Tigray, to make them feel that we are struggling towards the need of our people, including me, and, for the other people in Ethiopia who are not Tigrayans, who are not Tigrinya-speakers, I would like to tell them that, the, the need of… the people of Tigray even more, and then, we would like not to have other people, but we'd like to stay autonomous for, for ourselves. So, both are my audience but primarily, that's why I always write in Tigrinya, for the things who are Tigrayans, but I also write more in Amharic and English for the other community in Ethiopia to understand what we need, and then to cope up with our interests… yeah, that's it, yeah.

Were there any key moments where your community was growing?

Oh yeah, most of the time I do participate in events, events that impact society directly. There have been, there has been two or three events that… ok, there was, last year, there was clashes at universities, ethnic clashes, so, one Tigrayan was killed in a university that is located in the Amhara region, so, in Tigray, they have to pay back that… thing, and then they killed another Amhara student in Tigray, so, the clashes get to their, uhm, climax. And then we have to, we have to secure the Tigray students who are studying in Amhara, so, I, me and my friends has to make kind of committee that works on exceeding the Tigray students who are studying in Amhara. So we have to collect fans from the society, and then we have to arrange transportation and security there, so I have been part of this committee, I was leading this committee, that was one time where my followers grew so

2



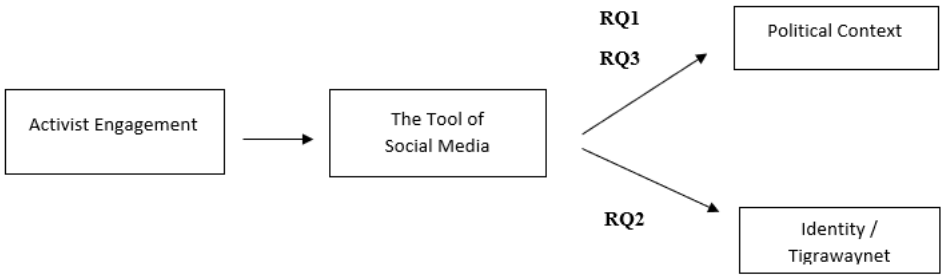
Notes

- Some stuff is repeated very often… to make the point very clear
- He uses the word ”fortunately” a lot
- Also, he was explaining a lot to me, as if he speaks to a bigger audience. He knows that I know what Lekatit 11 is, or what the TPLF is. That is his performance to me, he wants me to know that he is very familiar with the context and that he is able to explain it to me, and to another audience.
- His last point (seeing Tigray beyond Addis and being recognized by the international community) makes his goal quite clear about this interview. He wants the world to know about Tigray, with my help. Getting seen, being recognized…

Overview Categories and Themes

Themes	Categories	Sub-Categories	Codes
Activist Engagement	Networks / Connections to others		
	Online /Offline Relations		
	Personal Background		
		Media Experiences	
		Media Knowledge	
		Skills / Self-Assessment	
		Blogger Profile	
		Role as an Activist	
	Social Media Activities	Habits	
		Content	
		Impact / Importance	
		Business	
	Motivation to become Active		
		Goals	
	Audiences		
		Strategies	
		Trust / Credibility	
	Tactics against Government Restrictions		
	Personal Consequences / Dangers / Risks		
	Future Hopes and Dreams		
The Social Media Tool	Purpose of Social Media		
	Benefits		
	Negative Aspects		
	Development of Social Media		
Identity	Tigrawaynet		
		Tigrayan History	
		Digital Woyane	
		TPLF	
	Ethiopia		
	Nationalism		
	Incidents		
Political Context	Central Government		
		Reactions / Restrictions	
		Strategies	
	Tigray		
	TPLF		
	Worries		
	Hopes		
	The Purpose of Traditional Media		

From Themes to Research Questions



Excerpts from Categories and Themes (including Codes)

Identity	Tigrawaynet		- We have our own everything (1) - Tigray is ahead of the others (1) - For me it's both, civilization, social construct, and ancient history (2) - Somebody to be called tigrawaynet, one, it should have family from Tigray, should know at least some of the values of Tigrayan society, and should be proud of being Tigrayan, and I think you become Tigrayan by blood (2) - It's a social construct and genetic mechanism (2) - The society is unique, despite being small (2) - We believe in justice, and we don't want to oppress others, and we don't want others to oppress us (2) - We love our freedom more than anything else, we don't want to be subjected by others (2) - Tigrawaynet is, I think, a value system (2) - The ancient people of Tigray, they fight like tiger (3) - Tigrawaynet is national identity which has been and will be flourishing forever as it is the ray of life reality (3) - Tigrawaynet is shared things. We share all this history, the alphabet, the music (4) - We provide Ethiopia with music, alphabet, governance, even clothing, food, spice, and so many things (4) - Most Tigrayans feel the agony (4) - Tigrawaynet is, one, it evolves around the territorial integrity, and identity, and political and cultural sovereignty of Tigray. Pride of Tigray, dignity (4) - It's a lot about identity, collective social identity (5) - We are shaped of the past, our aspirations, visions and hopes for tomorrow, to regain old glories, to maintain our safety, security, Tigrayan security, problems and sacrifices (5) - It's not just one thing, all these things get interwoven (5) - It might be different thing to different person, but so is for any nation (5) - We have good culture, we are welcoming people (6) - We have many things which are unique (6) - Pay many sacrifices for this country, they pay everything for Ethiopia (6) - When you meet some farmers, he may give you everything, he may share his food even (6) - They are heroes for the country (6) - Tigray is rich, you know, Tigray is rich (6) - I don't post fake news, tigrawaynet is, not posting fake news (6) - Tigrayan-ness is simply the consciousness about Tigrayan national identity, Tigrayan national interests, Tigrayan sovereignty, and the aspiration for realization of the Tigray national people. Self-realization of Tigrayan people. (7) - The violence and displacements and discrimination, and undermining the role of Tigrayan heroes, and some elites use the history of Tigray as other nation's history, that make me conscious more about Tigray (8) - Even the people who hate Tigray can live safe in Tigray (8) - I will say as a Tigray nationalist, Tigray first. That's it. (9) - We are Tigrayans, we speak Tigrinya, we have this history, so we have to protect our land (10) - The feeling, we are Tigrayans. We and them (10) - Tigrawaynet, it is accomodating, it is not about hostility, it's not paranoid, it's very stable, it's peaceful, and it's base is about pride. It's about honour, about respect, it's about truth, these are the values, it's about justice, it's about equality (10)
		Tigrayan History	- The armed struggle which tackled the Dergue government in 1991 (1) - Axumite civilization (1) - Rooted in Tigray, not in Eritrea (1) - The black history, the most saddening part of our history (colonization) (7) - We were one of the great nations in the world, as part of our history, we want to be great as once upon a time (7)
		Digital Woyane	- Woyane is revolution. So, Tigray has two revolution, the first Woyane and the second Woyane (9) - Digital Woyane means fighter, fighting. We have to fight, ideally, in using ideas as our gun, this instrument (9) - There are a lot of Digital Woyanes after the change came (2018) (9)

Activist Engagement	Audiences		- Primarily the people of Tigray, secondary, the people of Ethiopia (1) - Most of my followers on Twitter are officials, in international communities, embassies (1) - The elite, who can then reach the rest (the farmers who don't even know about the internet) (1) - I write ideas to people who can understand them, to the… above average minds (2) - When I write, I write long articles, six, seven pages, I know that my audience is very, quite smaller. (2) - Of course I want to reach as many people as possible, the educated, the common man, everybody (2) - At YouTube, more peoples, they need entertainment, because all places political, political, they need to rest (3) - Top countries: Saudi Arabia, USA, Ethiopia. Maybe this Habesha people and Eritrean people, they are living there (3) - My circle is very inclusive, there are political party leaders, people in power (4) - The regional government is also quite receptive including the president, of that page (4) - What matters is influencing those who actually do decisions or do influence (4) - My followers are not only Tigrayans, many Oromos, many Amharas, many Somalis (4) - I want to address people even in the country and also abroad (6) - People from Oromia, from Amhara, they love Buach memes (9) - In fact, my magazine is the magazine for the Tigrayan elites. Largely, my posts also (10)
		Strategies	- We need to make it with agenda (3) - People have no interest in long writings (7) - In most cases, peoples, followers are to grow when I write most controversal issues (7) - You need to have some kind of style. If you don't have style, nobody will come up or will react (9) - I wrote an 8 months plan, to be on the top. I set an agenda (9) - You have to make your followers like family, you have to attached with people (9) - People doesn't like to read ten, eleven pages in a post (9) - I have to have a role model (9) - My way of political marketing, being very in touch with people and being political sarcastic (9) - I prefer memes because a lot of Ethiopian, they are not interested in politics stuff, because politics is not entertainment, so you have to have some other ways (9)
		Trust / Credibility	- Individuals like you in their own interests (2) - People who like to know more about Tigrawaynet may like me (2) - I deliver fast information, so people could be interested in this (2) - Give some information, clear information, then anyone follows (3) - I try to articulate their (the audience's) interest in a very comprehensive and scientific way (4) - People are not idiots, they are rational, so they like rational arguments (4) - My stand is clear, I don't switch positions (4) - You build credibility through time, that's why it's resilient (5) - Reminding the audience that what I told you was right. So I have those kinds of tactics to enforce their confidence (5) - If there's a good mix of good information, trustworthy information, if they think I'm committed to something, they will follow (5) - This is very subjective thing, or if this guy is somebody's friend I know the politics, I know the trends. And I started early, that's also a factor (5) - I used to have another Facebook account, but I deleted it for a purpose. It was not safe, the government was sponsoring some hackers (7) - I was writing about the fraternity of the Tigrayan speaking people across the border, in Eritrea. Many people were upset with me because of that, people were attacking me (7) - Many of my followers, I think, are Tigrayans. Since I am nationalist they are following me (8) - I respect, or I give credit to an activist, if you can set an agenda and people follow this agenda. If they don't get an idea, people doesn't react (9) - To be here, I have to go for five, six years, But I am here within two years (9) - Most of the leaders in Tigray check my page to understand what's on agenda this week, because I try to summarize (10)