

An Exploration of Misinformation in Data and its Effect on the Civil War in Ethiopia

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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As tensions built in Ethiopia over resources and power struggles in the past several decades. Ethnic and tribal tensions have created vicious divides amongst all corners of the country. The struggle for power amongst ethnic groups did not happen under a vacuum. After years of ethnic cleansing attempts by tribal groups in power against the marginalized ethnic groups as a form of internalized colonialism, when Prime Minister Abiy launched a defensive retaliation against rebel forces in the northern Tigray region, Ethiopia went into civil war. This war that started in November of 2020 has left over 156,000 Ethiopian men, women, and children dead. In addition to these casualties, tribal tensions have gone from bad to worse as entire livelihoods, communities, businesses and establishments have been turned to rubble.

I investigate how the manipulation of data continues to contribute to a tribalist and divided society in Ethiopia. At the heart of this research, I examine various case studies to answer the questions: How the misuse of data has resulted in war crimes and what methods and efforts are being taken to combat propaganda and the spread of misinformation amid the Ethiopian Civil war? Answering these questions draw heavily from Data Feminism, particularly D'Ignazio and Klein's conversations around power and pluralism.

Ethiopian Political Context Through Time

Ethiopia is home to over 80 different ethnic tribes and cultures. These ethnic groups have been able to live harmoniously for generations, however, as the political tides continued to pull on the nation in the 20th century, seeds of animosity were sowed. In the 20th century alone, Ethiopia went from a monarchy, to a pro-Soviet military regime, and finally to a Ethnofederalist

parliamentary republic (c.f.: Levine, 1974). The civil war in Ethiopia has been a true case study to the dangers of misinformation and how quickly it can spread in the digital age. The use of propaganda and swaying of narratives to fulfill political agendas has led to senseless killings in communities all over Ethiopia as well as destruction of businesses and establishments.

Digital Exploitation of Civilian Narratives

Throughout the course of the Ethiopian civil war, activists and journalists have been trying to bring to light the truth. However, because we live in an obscenely online era, the same piece of evidence is used by the Digital Wayne (a group of typically anti-Ethiopian radicals) who seek to fuel ethnic tensions to construct an entirely different narrative. For example, in a pro-Tigrayan/Wayne social media page, an image of two young boys are displayed drinking muddy water from the ground as a means of perpetuating the victim narrative of the TPLF (Trigrays People Liberation Force). After investigation of the images origins, it turns out that image was not from the Tigray region and was actually from an image taken in an ethnic minority region known as Afar (Mwai, 2021) which was suffering from a separate and unrelated humanitarian crisis. This is a prime example of how the Digital Wayane are using the struggles of civilians to amplify their agenda, while also discrediting the genuine efforts of Ethiopian journalists who seek to let the true experience and struggles of the civilians be seen. It is images like these that fuel strong emotional responses in uneducated civilians who then fall victim to the polarization tactics the ruling class are feeding to tribes in order to keep them at war with each other.

The corrupt political elites will take measures all the way from silencing activists, imprisoning them, or murdering them outright to maintain and take control of a narrative. An example of this sentiment is shown in this excerpt by Yonatan Tesfaye, the deputy head of the

broadcast authority, “we want the media to take the context we are in and we want them to operate respecting the rule of the law that the country has.” Publicization of true civilian accounts is a foreign concept to the elites in Ethiopia and even seen as a threat to their hold on power. As a result of the war and incidents of civilian expression for disdain on the suppression of data and information, the government “blacks out” entire states and zones of the nation by cutting access to the government controlled internet (York, G., & Zelalem, 2021). As a result, there has been a tight struggle between the people and access to the truth which has been gate-kept by the government.

I have personally experienced one of the politically motivated “black outs”. In 2017, I had gone back to visit my family back in Ethiopia, we had decided to take a trip down to the Southern Oromia region, where there had been word of political unrest and peaceful protests in the nearby cities (which were approximately 15 kilometers away from where my family and I were located). For this reason the government shut out all internet access for the entire zone (a 40 kilometers radius), and essentially blacked out any access civilians within the zone had with the outside world. For the time I was in Southern Oromia, I had no way to contact my relatives back in America to update them on our safety. Occurrences like these are very typical; when there's tribal tension amongst the people, there are many times where I haven't been able to contact my family members in Ethiopia because the government will block access to websites like Facebook, Whatsapp, and Messenger, to slow and stifle the spread of information. In this manner, the government is able to dictate the narratives and prevent the passage of accurate information.

Activists are present in Ethiopia, and many have tried multiple avenues to spread the truth as a form of rebellion against the repressive government. An example of this would be

when the National Amhara Movement (the Amhrara being an ethnic tribal group) attempted to hold a gathering/protest in response to the months of targeted killings against the Amhara people (Muchena, 2020). Historically, these kinds of protests and gatherings have been powerful tools for marginalized communities to gather and not only empower one another through trying times, but to also get together and discuss the truth and debunk misinformation. The response of the Ethiopian authorities as a result of these gatherings was to “ban all peaceful protests against ethnically motivated killings” (Muchena, 2020). This is a prime example of how authoritative governments abuse their power to control the spread of data and information, demeaning the work of activists and civil rights leaders alike.

In the times that individuals are able to relay information or share an opinion on domestic politics in Ethiopia, they are at risk for danger. For instance in ~1975, my grandfather was a political prisoner for five years on death row for speaking out against the new regime that took over after the assassination of King Haile Selassie. It was the wits of my grandmother and her ability to out smart the local governor’s office that he was able to be freed the day before he was meant to be executed. There are countless stories of political activists who have been exiled from Ethiopia or have been unjustly imprisoned for years. It is a very common occurrence that these political activists experience inhumane conditions during interrogations by officials.

Upon reflection of these cases of digital warfare and exploitation of power, we are compelled to ask how can all this continue to happen? Data Feminism helps us to pick apart the ways in which misrepresentation, tribalism, and misinformation propagate and cause literal harm.

Methods and Data Feminism

In the age of big data, Data Feminism is a primer for data scientists to understand essential ethical concepts like power, inequality, gender, and race. Core tenants of the Data Feminism framework I would like to draw attention to consist of: power and pluralism. The power tenant of Data Feminism, explores the intersectionality that can exist, particularly when it overlaps with other identities within a society. An example that highlights this would be Serena Williams's privileged position of getting additional care takers during her time of labor, despite the statistics and lack of support Black women typically are offered in the medical field, (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020, Ch.1 6-7). Her intersectional identities of being both a Black woman and a world-renowned tennis star collided, however, her privileged position stemming from her recognition offset the oppression she experiences as a Black woman. This specific example and tenant of Data Feminism delves into how some groups experience inherent advantages because of systems that have been placed for them by people who are similar to them which typically exacerbates systematic disadvantages within a society.

The tenant of pluralism within the Data Feminism framework is significant in understanding because it insists the importance of synthesizing multiple perspectives and not pedestaling knowledge sources by virtue of power hierarchies. This tenant even goes as far to emphasize the importance of giving priority to "local, indigenous, and experiential ways of knowing," (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020, Ch.6 4-5). This tenant is critical as throughout history, there has been a notion of the "victor" telling the narrative of history, whether that be colonizers, conquerors, or political groups controlling the distribution of historically accurate information. By this tenant, for a source to be reputable, it is best to cross-examine information from multiple points of view to put the true story together.

I use these principles to trace how information is shared and the mechanisms of which levels of information flow are controlled and manipulated. Furthermore, I use the Data Feminism framework to detail how falsifications are made into truth claims by virtue of propaganda, and information flow.

Data Infrastructure and Digital Violence in Ethiopia

Fake news, misinformation, and hate speech have thrived in Ethiopian media, as expressed in the research work by the European Institute of Peace (2021). In this scholarly work, the European Union examines the use of media and propaganda and how it has negatively plagued Ethiopia with ethnic tension and instability. In reading the paper and comparing it to the material present in D'Ignazio & Klein conversations on Data Feminism, it has become apparent that much of the struggle for power in Ethiopia has been supported by the advent of anti-data feminist ideologies and movements for suppression of information to the public about the true affairs of the government and intra-tribal relations.

To fully understand the scope of data distribution in Ethiopia, it is necessary to consider the nature of Ethiopian telecommunication. In this Scholarly work, the Human Rights Watch, examines the extent of the Ethiopian government's control of telecommunications. As stated in this literature, the Ethiopian government has complete control of telecommunications in Ethiopia (via the only network available in Ethiopia - Ethio telecom). For this reason "Ethiopian Security officials have virtually unlimited access to the call records of all telephone users in Ethiopia," (HRW, 2022). Furthermore, in regards to access to broadband internet "0% [of Ethiopians] have their own fast internet connection, which is at least faster than 256 kbit/s," (WorldData, 2019). Given the limitations on access to the internet, activists and civilians have been especially

monitored during this civil war due to the lack of data privacy, recording of phone calls, logging of call lists, and location tracking that have been used on individuals flagged by political officials. This kind of dictation on what is being outputted into the internet gives the corrupt leaders and those with malicious intentions the ability to control what is displayed to the Western World as well as to the diaspora, which goes against the pillars of Data Feminism that seek to not give a privileged position to politicians perspectives, In relation to the notion of pluralism as a part of the Data Feminsim framework, ruling powers of Ethiopia have made it increasingly difficult for activists to construct an account of what is truly happening at the grassroots. This in turn counteracts and stifles the efforts of free speech activists in Ethiopia who desperately seek to spread the truth digitally.

In extension of this discussion, data privacy has not been given to Ethiopians. In fact, “Ethiopia does not have a single and comprehensive legal instrument regulating privacy and data protection” (DataGuidance, Haile). Many civilians are too afraid to speak up or even voice political opinions amongst their peers let alone on telecom networks, as they may be tracked and inhumanely interrogated. While stifling the right to free speech has been a direct outcome of the excessive government surveillance, an indirect by-product to lack of privacy has resulted in considerable levels of self-censorship amongst Ethiopians (HRW, 2020). This has had even more exacerbated effects in rural regions of Ethiopia, which are often targeted by corrupt officials for their resources, by the notion of mobile technology and the internet being another means of monitorization (HRW, 2020). This social shift has been demoralizing to Ethiopian activists that put in their best efforts and risk their livelihoods trying to recount the true narrative that constantly gets lost in all the propaganda that is spread, so much so that civilians seek to disassociate from activists out of fear that they will become targets by association.

Application of Data Feminism in the Ethiopian Civil War

In regard to pluralism, it is emphasized by the Data Feminism framework that we need to consider multiple sources, this tenant has been consistently violated in Ethiopia which is congruent with the cascading effects of the war that has turned civilian against civilian, as almost an entire nation is fueled by stress, anxiety, confusion, and fear. The collectivist culture that I grew up knowing has embodied widespread distrust and hatred towards one another. I can see the seeds of animosity being sowed within Ethiopians of my generation. More often than not, the youth tend to regurgitate the politics of their parents and grandparents as opposed to researching accurate histories, who seldom have had access to the true accounts of Ethiopian politics and are typically plagued by bias and tribalism. To the average Ethiopian who seeks peace for their nation, political activists, and individuals of the diaspora thousands of miles away from home, it is a very helpless and frustrating feeling not being able to discern what is true and what is false or even know if your loved one's are safe.

In regard to power tenant of Data Feminism, the civil war in Ethiopia demonstrates the consequences of having the distribution of information being subject to power structures. The rapid propagation of misinformation in Ethiopia, has truly wreaked havoc. At the current point of the war, data, knowledge, and information are all subject to political agendas. It is essential for the Western/external providers (ZTE, Chinese telecommunications company and surveillance infrastructure from European companies) of the technologies used by the Ethiopian government to critically assess and address the human rights impact they have had in regards to the spread of misinformation. The weaponization of information and data has polarized Ethiopia and forced civilians to live in fear of tyrannical rule. The lack of regulation in regards to the malpractice by

the government's use of spyware has been largely unregulated and yielded insurmountable damage to the nation.

As we can observe, there are many factors as to what has gone into the atrocities of the civil war. Just as much as the corrupt Ethiopian officials are responsible for the spread of falsified information, Western news outlets and media continue to fuel the flames of the propaganda by amplifying the messages relayed by the corrupt officials. This, once again, ties back to the power tenant of Data Feminism, because even in Western media, the West will only display narratives that fit the best interest of their political agendas. Although it can not concretely be proven or disproven the motivations behind Western media's coverage on the civil war of Ethiopia, I have been able to see an alarming rate of inaccuracy and under coverage of the full scope of what's going on in Ethiopia by Western media outlets compared to my own accounts and experiences of the war.

It is essential for the dispersal of true and accurate information to be available during a time of crisis. The principles of Data Feminism can yield clarity for all parties involved in the war and show the populace who the true enemy is, the corrupt officials that attain power through disruption. As the political and data activists continue to push for equal access to true information, the principles of Data Feminism, when applied correctly, have a potential to shift the tides of this war and lay the foundation of a new future rooted in transparency for the developing nation.

Conclusion

As highlighted in the discussion of Ethiopia's problematic tendency with the lack of data integrity, Ethiopian diasporas as well as civilians in Ethiopia are attempting to reclaim the power

of social media as a means to unify and educate others, however, this has resulted in the advent of the spread of more fake news and mass casualties of those back home. YouTube, Facebook, and other media outlets have been prime components of the so-called “digital activism”. The impediment of sifting through what remains true and what information is false continues to fuel fire to the war. The most unfortunate part of this war is the cost of all the greed and hunger for power has been innocent civilian lives.

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