MECHACHAL:
A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT
OF ONLINE DEBATES
IN ETHIOPIA

REPORT ONE
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HOW TO CITE THIS WORK?


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PICTURE ON PAGE 9: Matti Pohjonen (Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0)
1. INTRODUCTION
MECHACHAL is a collaborative project developed by the University of Oxford and Addis Ababa University to understand the nature and potential of online debates in Ethiopia. Mechachal can be translated from Amharic as “tolerance”, or as one’s awareness of their own social sphere and willingness to accommodate other social spheres that are different from a cultural and religious standpoint. The project builds on a pilot that took place between October 2013 and February 2014 and focused on online hate speech. The pilot offered valuable insights on the nature and potential risks of messages inciting hatred online, but it also highlighted the limitations of an approach that focuses prevalently on the negative aspects of online communication, with the potential downside of further contributing to creating a sense of instability and insecurity.

Taking stock of the experience accumulated in the pilot, Mechachal’s team developed methodology to analyse online debates that are emerging from and targeting Ethiopians in Ethiopia and in the Diaspora. This report is the first of a series of three and examines some key aspects of this approach. In particular, it offers an empirically grounded illustration of how, despite the polarization that has characterized the political environment in Ethiopia, online debates tend to favour engagement across divides, rather than exacerbating existing tensions.

The results illustrated here emerge from four weeks of data collection and analysis (between 24 February and 24 March 2015). They represent the result of the team’s first effort to code online debates on a daily basis and thus have to be considered tentative. They offer, however, an indication of some of the trends that can be encountered in online spaces targeting Ethiopians in Ethiopia and abroad. Given the importance of the Ethiopian elections in May 2015, particular attention has been paid to map debates revolving around elections.
2. METHODOLOGY
2.1. THREE PHASES OF THE PROJECT

Mechachal’s methodology was developed in three distinct phases, and was progressively tailored to adapt to the unique features characterizing online debates in Ethiopia.

In a FIRST PHASE, during the pilot, we drew inspiration from the UMATI project that was launched by a group of researchers and entrepreneurs ahead of Kenya’s electoral competition in 2013 to monitor online instances of hate speech. UMATI (which means crowd in Kiswahili) emerged in response to the violence that erupted in Kenya in the aftermath of the 2007 election, which left more than 1,000 people dead and 600,000 displaced. Its overall goal was to detect signals of tension that may be mounting among Kenyan citizens and offer a picture of the major fault lines characterizing different phases of the electoral contest, and to sound the alarm before it was too late. UMATI tracked blogs, forums, online newspapers and Facebook and Twitter content generated by Kenyans in English as well in the major languages spoken in Kenya, including Kikuyu, Luhya, Kalenjin, Luo, Kiswahili, Sheng (a slang spoken mostly in urban areas), and Somali.

Adopting the definition of dangerous speech elaborated by Susan Benesch as speech with high likelihood to inspire or catalyze violence by one group of people against another, the UMATI team defined practical criteria to discern among different speech acts and weigh their potential to catalyse violence. Monitors evaluated questions based on the influence the speaker had upon the online community, the content of the statement, and the social and historical context that the speech occurred in. As a result of the combination of these criteria, speech acts could be sorted into three different categories: offensive speech, moderately dangerous speech, and dangerous speech.

The pilot project in Ethiopia adapted some methods elaborated by UMATI to understand the nature of online hate speech in Ethiopia. It was limited in its scope (it monitored only 137 statements over a period of two weeks), but it successfully created a forum for representatives of the Ethiopian Government, the major opposition parties, civil servants, academics, members of international organisations and of civil society groups, as well as journalists and bloggers at different ends of the political spectrum in Ethiopia to collectively discuss the results.

In a SECOND PHASE Mechachal took stock from the experience of the pilot and sought to implement an enhanced methodology that could address the two main challenges the pilot highlighted: a) the need to understand not just the nature, but also the prevalence of hate speech in the context of broader online debates; and b) the importance of understanding the functioning of spaces of engagement, where users seek to create communicative relationships across divides, rather than exacerbating existing tensions. The first challenge was addressed by improving Mechachal’s sampling strategy (highlighted in Section 2.3), the second by developing an innovative framework that could allow an analysis of a broad spectrum of online debates (highlighted in section 2.2). During this second phase a team of experts in research methods as well scholars who have been conducting research on Ethiopia were gathered in Oxford to reflect on the new methodology, which was tested by the newly assembled research team between December 2014 and January 2015.

Finally, in a THIRD PHASE, Mechachal’s research team started analyzing online debates on a daily basis, seeking to develop an increasingly nuanced picture of online debates focusing on Ethiopia. This first report offers an overview of some preliminary findings, placing particular emphasis on the methodology that was adopted to obtain them. The following two reports will offer a more in-depth analysis of what characterises Ethiopia’s online sphere and of how certain phenomena (e.g. elections, commemoration of historical events) may trigger specific types of speech.
FIGURE 1: MECHACHAL CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

HATE SPEECH FRAMEWORK

THEORIES OF DELIBERATION

MECHACHAL

DISCOURSE THEORY & CONTENT ANALYSIS

PICTURE: The methodology workshops held in Oxford in December 2014
2.2. SAMPLING STRATEGY

Conducting research on online spaces in Ethiopia presents unique challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, the Internet reaches only a small portion of the population—around 2% in 2014. On the other hand, because of the limited availability of other media sources, online debates, especially on social networking platforms such as Facebook, have attracted significant attention and offer a broad spectrum of the most important themes characterizing Ethiopia’s political sphere. In the initial phases of the project, the research team decided to focus their attention on Facebook, which is considered by Ethiopian bloggers, politicians, and academics as the most important platform for political and social conversation in Ethiopia (a phenomenon shared with other countries where Internet penetration is limited and where for many users “Facebook is the Internet”).

The distinctiveness of the languages spoken in Ethiopia, together with the still limited Internet penetration in the country, offered the opportunity to the team to achieve something unique: a comprehensive mapping of Ethiopia’s Facebook online spaces. In the second month of the project, the team embarked on the ambitious effort of mapping any Facebook individual, pages, and groups fulfilling the following three criteria:

- **Have 100 or more followers** (for individual profiles)/**likes** (for pages)/**members** (for public groups);
- **Have at least some content in an Ethiopian Language**;
- **Raise discussion topics** on Ethiopia.

The result was a list of 1055 Facebook **online spaces** covering issues from politics, to religion, to sport, and travel. This offered a sampling frame that, as indicated in **FIGURE 2**, has enabled the team to regularly select spaces according to three different strategies:

- **Spaces selected randomly** in order to ensure results can be generalized;
- **Most popular spaces** that are analyzed everyday to map ongoing trends;
- **Spaces selected purposefully** in order to capture a particular event (e.g. A protest, the inauguration of a new project), ongoing issue (e.g. Elections), or particular type of speech (e.g. Hate speech).

In each of these spaces, both posts/status updates and comments are then selected for analysis for a total of 80 statements per day on average, and approximately 2,000 statements a month.

This strategy has allowed the project team to analyze online debates on a broad variety of issues, and to locate them in their proper context.
FIGURE 2: MECHACHAL RESEARCH WORKFLOW

MECHACHAL WORKFLOW

SPACES

1055 FACEBOOK PAGES

Random selection → Random

Popular selection → Trends

Purposive selection → Events

Issues

Elections

ICR

SAMPLING

Random

80 statements per day

Trends

1900 statements per month

Events

Issues

Elections

ICR

CODING

EIGHT CODERS

Intercoder reliability tests
2.3. GOING AGAINST / GOING TOWARDS

MECHACHAL began with an interest in identifying and analysing hate speech, especially messages with the highest likelihood of leading to violence. Since the pilot, the research team has devised increasingly sophisticated and tailored techniques to capture these kinds of messages. At the same time, for the reasons highlighted above, we sought to develop a framework that could allow the analysis and categorization of different types of statements, developing a progressively deeper understanding of the nature and quality of online debates in Ethiopia, and of the resources potentially available to promote new forms of engagement.

Two central elements of this framework are the ideas of statements “going against” and “going towards”. They are rooted in research and theories of deliberation, political conflict, and political engagement and they have been progressively tailored to apply to Ethiopia’s political environment. Going towards and going against are not about agreeing or disagreeing, but more about the tendency to take a viewpoint seriously and engage with it, or, on the contrary, to dismiss it and directly attack a person for his/her affiliation with a specific group.

Statements that “go against” are statements attacking another speaker or a specific group by belittling, challenging, provoking, teasing them maliciously or explicitly threatening them. They represent a conflict-producing or a conflict-maintaining behaviour. This includes statements that explicitly advocate hatred based on ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual identity or political affiliation and which incite to discriminate, be hostile or violently attack individuals or groups based on their belonging to a group.

Statements that “go towards” are statements that help initiate, maintain, and/ or build a communicative relationship, for example acknowledging another person or group’s position, offering additional information about the topic being discussed, joking (in a non-hostile teasing way) and creating engagement and conversation with the other members in the discussion. This refers to the kinds of statements that attempt to engage the members in a conversation in a constructive way or by countering previous attempts at hate and dangerous speech. This can include, for instance, statements that focus on the issues raised rather than attacking the speaker; offering balanced arguments about the positive and negative sides of the conflict; by citing studies and factual sources for the conversation; by offering additional information about the topic being discussed. The question is not about agreeing or disagreeing here but rather about the tendency to take another viewpoint seriously.

The concepts of going against and towards are aimed at cutting the continuum of statements uttered in online debates into two broad categories and represent the beginning of more in-depth analysis of statements. However, not all statements can be categorized as going either towards or against, and we have thus included a residual category for “other” statements. These are statements that may be simply too unclear, that do not talk about Ethiopia or have no relevance for Ethiopia. Examples of going against, going towards and other statements can be found in the box on the following page.
GOING AGAINST

Types of statements “going against” include the following:

• the speaker does not recognize the legitimacy of his/her opponent and dismisses the opponent's point of view just because s/he is part of a specific group;

• the speaker attacks an opponent or a group saying they have no right to be in Ethiopia, or in a particular city, or in another geographic area;

• the speaker openly calls for a violent attack on a specific group, in response to a specific event or issue;

• the speaker refuses attempts from another speaker to engage in a dialogue, just because the other speaker belongs to a particular group or supports a particular group;

• the speaker seeks to be objective, and offers his/her analysis of contemporary/historical events and issues;

• the speaker conducts socio-political campaigns without calling for violently attacking their opponents.

GOING TOWARDS

Types of statements “going towards” include the following:

• the speaker offers a strong criticism of a political opponent, but in a way that recognizes him/her as a legitimate adversary and encourages an answer;

• the speaker focuses his/her criticism on a specific issue or policy, rather than claiming that his/her opponent does not have the right to speak, rule, etc.

• It is unclear what the statement means;

• The statement does not talk about Ethiopia or does not have relevance for Ethiopia (for example it refers to some event that happened elsewhere and has no apparent link with the country);

• Statements about subjects that have no direct relevance for the research project, for example: a) a comment or remark about topics not related to ethnicity, religion or politics, such as food or fashion or nature or sport; b) an advertisement or review of a company or service in ways where issues related to ethnicity, religion or politics are not called upon.
As illustrated in FIGURE 3, the analysis of the answers for statements going against has been organised in such a way that statements can be categorised in four different groups: offensive speech, hate speech, dangerous speech with limited possibility for the speakers (or the groups they appeal to) to carry out violence, dangerous speech with risk that the speakers (or the groups they appeal to) could carry out violence. In categorising these types of statements, we limited the analysis to statements that target people based on their ethnicity, religion, and gender or sexual affiliation. This is to comply with international, regional, and national legal frameworks defining hate speech, which exclude purely political statements from their definitions. Our framework, and its testing on different occasions to learn from the data themselves and ensure it is both theoretically informed and empirically grounded, also allowed the research team to identify different categories that are relevant for the Ethiopian context, such as thresholds to understand how influential a speaker is, or how positive or negative a response to a statement is. These other elements of the methodology are addressed as we present the research findings in the following sections.

FIGURE 3: CATEGORISATION OF “AGAINST” STATEMENTS

---

The image below illustrates the categorisation process:

1. **On which grounds can the statement be considered antagonistic?**
   - Ethnicity / religious / gender
   - Political

2. **Does the statement contain any of the following?**
   - Uses derogatory terms
   - Suggests threat of violence
   - Contains explicit call to action
   - Spreads a rumour

3. **Does the statement encourage the audience to do any of the following actions?**
   - Insult or humiliate, Boycott, Discriminate
   - Riot, Loot, Beat, Evict, Kill
   - It calls for other forms of physical violence

4. **Does the audience have the means to carry out violence?**

   - No / Unknown
   - Yes

---

**C1: OFFENSIVE SPEECH**

**C2: HATE SPEECH**

**C3: DANGEROUS SPEECH WITH LIMITED RISK**

**C4: DANGEROUS SPEECH WITH RISK OF VIOLENCE**

---

On which grounds can the statement be considered antagonistic?

- Ethnicity / religious / gender
- Political

Does the statement contain any of the following?

- Uses derogatory terms
- Suggests threat of violence
- Contains explicit call to action
- Spreads a rumour

Does the statement encourage the audience to do any of the following actions?

- Insult or humiliate, Boycott, Discriminate
- Riot, Loot, Beat, Evict, Kill
- It calls for other forms of physical violence

Does the audience have the means to carry out violence?

- No / Unknown
- Yes

Is the target able to call upon institutions?

- Yes
- No / Unknown
3. RESULTS
3.1. KEY FINDINGS

Statements analysed in this report were selected using different criteria. The general sample is comprised of 622 statements selected randomly from the sampling frame assembled at the beginning of the project and coded between 24 February and 24 March 2015. A second sample, analysed in Section 4, is comprised of statements focusing on the Ethiopian parliamentary elections and include 134 such statements coded in the same period between February and March. For those statements that could be categorised as either going towards or going against, statements of the first kind were the large majority (50% versus just 17% of the total number of statements coded).?  

FIGURE 4: PROPORTION OF “AGAINST” OR “TOWARDS” STATEMENTS
In terms of where speakers were posting from, most of them were from Ethiopia (42%), but a significant proportion was from outside of the country (22%). These figures could be considered as both confirming and refuting the narrative about online debate on Ethiopia being driven by the Diaspora. On the one hand, twice as many people are posting from within Ethiopia, but the fact that 22% of individuals discussing issues related to Ethiopia are from the Diaspora is a significant number, especially when considered in a comparative perspective. As FIGURE 5 indicates, however, for a significant portion of Facebook users it was not possible to identify their location. This is because Facebook posts are not geocoded, and we decided to adopt a conservative approach, registering the provenance only if this was expressly stated in the user profile. We are aware that some users may play with their location or not update it regularly and thus indicate a location that is not the actual one, but we decided to begin with a simpler approach.

FIGURE 5: WHERE ARE THE SPEAKERS FROM?

![World Map with statistics on speakers' location]

- Ethiopia: 42%
- Outside Ethiopia: 22%
- Unknown: 36%
Among those posting from outside of Ethiopia, 50% were, unsurprisingly, from the USA. But the list of runners up may appear less obvious, with South Africa, Saudi Arabia, and Norway occupying the second position with 6% of the statements, and the UK and Canada only at 2%. We are expecting these percentages to change as the corpus of statements increase, but they are significant as they begin to delineate the composition of Ethiopia’s online Diaspora, which to date has often been referred to as a unitary group.

FIGURE 6: WHERE ARE THE SPEAKERS OUTSIDE ETHIOPIA LOCATED?
Finally, when we look at the role the speakers have in Facebook conversations, we can see here how individuals using their own name dominate with unidentifiable commentators and journalist / bloggers and politicians affiliated with the government (among other categories) being represented in the data. The following two sections go deeper into the statements that go against and go towards, offering a more fine grained understanding of the nature of each type of statements.

**FIGURE 7: WHO ARE THE SPEAKERS?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual using their own name</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidentifiable commentator</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist/blogger</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activist</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politician (government)</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business representative</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politician (opposition)</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious representative</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic group representative</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media (offline, online and radio)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports person</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign embassy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government affiliated institutions</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrity</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community leader</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2. STATEMENTS GOING AGAINST

As previously mentioned, statements going against represent 17% of the total number of statements in the general sample. These can be antagonistic or offensive on various grounds. In order to better grasp the nature of statements going against, we have grouped them under four categories: statements antagonistic politically, religiously, ethnically and on other grounds (e.g. gender, age, or statements that are antagonistic towards an individual without a strong affiliation). It is important to point out that some statements are antagonistic or offensive on two or more grounds. As it can be seen in the figure, the majority of the statements go against for political reasons. The second reason for uttering offensive statements is ethnicity, though invoked significantly less than politics.

FIGURE 8: TYPES OF STATEMENTS GOING AGAINST

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Speakers uttering statements that go against generally use non-insulting language, and they do not suggest, imply or call the audience to physical or non-physical violence. Nonetheless, as indicated in FIGURE 9, there are instances in which speakers use insulting/derogatory terms or metaphors.

To a lesser extent, there are statements uttered with the purpose of suggesting that the audience faces a serious threat of violence. Statements which contain an explicit call to physical or non-physical violence are also present in this sample, but are extremely limited.

In order to isolate a potential risk of violence, FIGURE 10 focuses on the extent to which the speakers have deliberately encouraged the audience to take any sort of violent actions, whether of a physical or psychological nature.

It can be observed that the majority of the statements do not contain any call to action. Among those that did, the vast majority contained encouragements to insult or humiliate, while suggestions to evict, discriminate, boycott, kill or commit any other type of physical or psychological violence are very limited.
FIGURE 9: WHAT ELEMENTS OF DANGEROUS SPEECH DOES THE STATEMENT CONTAIN?

- An explicit call to physical or non-physical violence
- Suggests that the audience faces a serious threat of violence from another group
- Uses insulting/derogatory terms or metaphors (such as comparing a group of people with animals or insects)
- The statement does not contain any hallmark of dangerous speech

FIGURE 10: WHAT KIND OF ACTION DOES THE STATEMENT EXPLICITLY ENCOURAGE THE AUDIENCE TO TAKE?

- Evict
- Another form of psychological or non-physical violence
- Calls for violence in a generic way
- Discriminate
- Boycott
- Kill
- Insult/humiliate
- The statement does not contain a call to physical or psychological violence
To better understand the potential for violence, it is also important to look at the response that statements going against received from the audience. The fact that the majority of statements (74%) received little or no observable response is an indicator that antagonistic statements may have limited ability to stir conflict, whether online or offline.

Nonetheless, some statements did receive significant responses or support from the public. These represent 4% of the total number of statements going against.

Even if the sample considered in this report is limited, the relative absence of explicit calls to action deserves some attention. Other studies on participation and debates on social media have indicated a tendency for users to use those as platforms for coordinating actions offline. These include both peaceful actions (e.g. support for a specific cause or person) and incitements to attack specific targets. As our findings seem to indicate – and this argument can be extended to statements going towards as illustrated in the next section – in the case of the Ethiopian online sphere there is more a tendency to express opinions or criticise certain figures, rather than to use social media to coordinate actions offline.

Figure 12 presents the findings filtered through the equation highlighted earlier in Section 2.3. Among statements going against, just a few can be considered offensive on ethnic or religious grounds, only six incite towards hatred based on someone’s identity, and three statements can be considered dangerous.
TRANSLATION: It is stated in revelation of St. Mariam that she has dreamt (lit. “based on her dream”) that one will go to hell if he had sex with a woman who recently delivered a baby, or with a Galla [Oromo], or with a Shankilla [blacks], or with an Islam [Muslim] or with a Falasha [Ethiopian Jews] or with a horse, or with a donkey.

TRANSLATION: Cognizant that Ethiopian blood is not so cheap that splashes over anywhere, you [the government] agitated us and you become worried. No more teasing by the name of Derg. Time has come to retaliate an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth. Death to Woyane and Shabea [PFDJ]! Victory for the true children of Ethiopia! May God keep Ethiopia safe!
3.3. STATEMENTS GOING TOWARDS

Statements going towards make up half of the statements in the general sample. Similarly to the statements going against, statements going towards can be engaging on various grounds. We have used the same four categories (political, religious, ethnic and other) to group the statements in order to better grasp the extent of engagement. It can be seen once again that a good part of the engagement that takes place in the Facebook online environment is directed towards people/entities for political reasons.

FIGURE 13: WHAT ARE THE GROUNDS FOR ENGAGEMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ground</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unlike statements going against, the second largest category is the one representing engagement based on reasons other than political, religious and/or ethnic. It is important to point out that the majority of statements in the other category are directed towards all Ethiopians, all readers or a particular individual. These are statements directed to all Ethiopians, to individuals without a strong affiliation, or, to a smaller extent, are directed to women, the youth, students or journalists. The majority of engaging statements are either offering an opinion, offering information/data or supporting/accepting support. There are also statements seeking information or opinions, acting as a joke or using humour in non-derogatory ways, and acting as counter-speech, by referring to another statement which can be flagged as offensive.
FIGURE 14: WHAT IS THE TONE AND ATTITUDE OF THE STATEMENT?

- Act as counter-speech: it refers to another statement that can be flagged as offensive
- Act as a joke: it teases or uses humour in a non-derogatory or non-demeaning way
- Seek information or opinion
- Support or accept support
- Offer information/data
- Offer an opinion

FIGURE 15: WHAT KINDS OF ENGAGEMENT DOES THE STATEMENT ENCOURAGE?

- It seeks to encourage the audience towards greater understanding and tolerance
- It presents and delivers criticism in a way that is polished and thoughtful, appealing to reason and logic, including/often with use of supporting evidence
- It represents a strong and firm criticism that recognises the other as a legitimate adversary with whom it may be useful to engage
- Brief and plain
While the majority of statements going towards are brief and plain, some speakers do choose to expand more on the reasons for their engagement. As it can be seen in FIGURE 15, around 40 statements represent a strong and firm criticism that recognizes the other as a legitimate adversary with whom it might be useful to engage or negotiate.

A further 30 statements present and deliver criticism in a way that is polished and thoughtful, appealing to reason and logic, including/often with use of supporting evidence. Just fewer than 30 statements seek to encourage the audience to greater understanding and tolerance.

EXAMPLE OF A STATEMENT THAT USES STRONG CRITICISM BUT NONETHELESS TRIES TO ENGAGE IN A DIALOGUE

Still wondering why there is so much difference in the appropriation of this man's racist legacy...especially among the 'enlightened', 'progressive', minds who are 'fighting for democracy'... They don't even understand how this double standard (of defending the indefensible because it is 'ours' and denouncing another indefensible logic just because it is 'theirs') robs them of any moral ground in their quest for democracy. How can you so desperately hold onto a racist utterance of the past and yet insist that you are fighting for equal rights, democracy, and freedom? ...

"I am not a Negro at all; I am a Caucasian"

TIKUR SEW on my mind...

See Translation

Like Share

50 people like this.
In order to better grasp the extent of engagement, the next figure focuses on whether the statements encouraged the audience to take any actions. Similarly to the case of going against statements, the majority of speakers in this sample tend not to encourage the audience to take any particular action.

**FIGURE 16: WHAT ACTIONS ARE THE AUDIENCE ENCOURAGED TO TAKE?**

As analysed in the going against sample, it is important to look at the response received from the audience. Statements going towards received a positive response from other members of the conversation in 73% of cases.

**FIGURE 17: WHAT IS THE PREVALENT RESPONSE OF AUDIENCES INVOLVED IN THE CONVERSATION?**
4. ELECTIONS
Statements analysed in this section have been purposefully selected in reference to the upcoming Ethiopian elections. The sample includes 134 statements. The proportion of statements going towards and against is more significant and larger in this sample compared to the general sample. Of the 134 election related statements, 61% go towards and 34% go against. This leaves a small percentage of statements (5%) that could not have been classified in any of the two categories.

**FIGURE 18: GOING TOWARDS OR GOING AGAINST?**

![Bar chart showing the distribution of statements going towards, against, and other in the election sample and the general sample.](image-url)
4.1. ELECTIONS: SPEAKERS

In both the general and the election samples, the largest numbers of speakers are individuals using their own name. However, in this sample, the second largest category is represented by politicians in the opposition. Unidentifiable commentators who were the second largest category in the random sample, have now fallen onto the third place. The fourth largest category in the elections sample consists of politicians representing the government. Journalists/bloggers also play a significant role in the election debate, as they are the fifth largest category. The percentage of speakers with high influence has more than doubled compared to the general sample (28% of speakers in the election sample have a high level of influence as opposed to only 13% in the general sample). Nonetheless, more than half (57%) of people in this sample have little or no influence.

Speaker location was similar to the general sample, with a slight increase in terms of identifying where they were based – 46% of the people were based in Ethiopia, while 25% were identified as being outside Ethiopia. Among those posting from outside Ethiopia, almost half were from the USA. Similar to the general sample, the second position is occupied by Norway.

The Norwegian Diaspora represents 15% of the speakers posting on election related issues from outside Ethiopia. This was followed by the UK, the Netherlands and Germany, each at 6%. Therefore, this represents a significant change from the general sample where users from South Africa and Saudi Arabia represented the countries with the largest amount of users after the USA.
FIGURE 20: ELECTIONS: LOCATION OF SPEAKERS

- Sudan: 3%
- South Africa: 3%
- Saudi Arabia: 3%
- Israel: 3%
- France: 3%
- Bangladesh: 3%
- UK: 6%
- Germany: 6%
- Netherlands: 6%
- Norway: 15%
- USA: 49%
- Unknown: 29%

FIGURE 21: ELECTIONS: COUNTRY BREAKDOWN OF SPEAKERS
4.2. ELECTIONS: GOING AGAINST:

As previously mentioned, statements going against represent 34% of the total number of statements in the election sample. This is a significant increase compared to the general sample where statements going against represented 17% of the total number of statements in that sample.

We used the same four-factor framework to discern between different types of antagonism: political, religious, ethnic and other. In the election sample, there was however no antagonism based on religious reasons. As expected, the vast majority of statements were antagonistic or offensive for political reasons. Very few statements were antagonistic or offensive on ethnic and/or other grounds.

FIGURE 22: ELECTIONS: WHAT ARE THE GROUNDS FOR ANTAGONISM IN THE ELECTIONS SAMPLE?

Similar to the general sample, speakers uttering statements related to the elections that go against tend not to use insulting language, and they do not frequently suggest, imply or call the audience to physical or non-physical violence. There are, however, some instances where individuals used insulting or derogatory terms or metaphors, such as comparing a group of people with animals or insects. Within our sample there was one statement suggesting that the audience could face a serious threat of violence and another statement containing an explicit call to physical or non-physical violence.

In an effort to understand the relationship between speech and the potential for violence, the next section focuses on the degree to which speakers have deliberately encouraged the audience to take action and the response from the audience.

Compared to the general sample, the percentage of statements that received a moderate or significant level of response or support has increased to 9% and the percentage of statements receiving little or no observable response or support has decreased.
4.3. ELECTIONS: GOING TOWARDS

Statements going towards make up almost two thirds of the election sample (61%). Statements related to elections can be engaging on various grounds. We have used the same four-category scale, grouping statements based on their reasons for engagement: political, religious, ethnic and other. Once again, as expected, the vast majority of statements in the election sample are engaging politically. The second largest category, though smaller than the first one, is represented by statements encouraging ethnic dialogue. Some of the statements are promoting engagement on grounds other than political, religious or ethnic, which generally means that they are encouraging more of a pan-Ethiopian identity. There is also a very small sample of statements in the election sample that are encouraging religious dialogue.

FIGURE 23: ELECTIONS: WHAT ARE THE GROUNDS FOR ENGAGEMENT

The majority of engaging statements are either offering an opinion or offering information/data. Unlike engaging statements in the random sample, the third category in the election sample is represented by statements that use humour in non-derogatory or non-demeaning ways. To better understand the extent of engagement, it is important to look at the tone and attitude of statements. Even though the largest category is represented by statements which are brief and plain, there is a significant presence of statements which present or deliver criticism.

Statements which represent a strong and firm criticism that nonetheless recognises the other as a legitimate adversary with whom it might be useful to engage or negotiate are also present in this sample. Though to a lesser extent, some engaging statements in the election sample also seek to encourage the audience towards greater understanding and tolerance.
In my opinion it is wrong to leave economic issues for the governing party only. Semayawi party must make its strategy and policy on this public. It is easy to know that it is useless to campaign for a peasant farmer about freedom of speech and democracy. In contrast, telling the farmer that having an administrative structure which enables him to buy fertiliser and sell his product in whichever part of the country he wants is a must. This should be done in a language the farmer can understand. As such, any party must reveal its economic policies clearly.

European Union said “it will not observe the election because the government does not accept the reports” It also said that it did not receive invitation from the government to observe the election. The European Union, which stated that it did not get invitation to observe the May election, also said that it distanced itself from the election because its reports were not accepted by the government.

It is not convinced about the merits of sending another observer mission given that the Ethiopian government rejected the European Union’s election observer mission reports in 1997 and 2002 (2005 and 2010 in the European calender) . The Ethiopian government on its part said this does not affect the credibility of the election. Prime Minister Haile Mariam Desalegne said in a press conference that the European Union has its own reasons not to observe the election; and that representatives from the African Union and domestic civil society groups shall observe the election.

It is to be recalled that a European Union election observation team led by Ana Gomez severely criticised the 1997 (2005) election leading to a major controversy. Additionally, the European Union stated that the 2002 (2010) election did not satisfy international standards while it also stated that the electoral process was generally good.
While the vast majority of statements in this sample do not encourage the audience to take any actions, amongst the ones that do, as expected, voting for a specific party represents the largest category. Nonetheless, it is also important to look at the type of response received from the audience.

Going towards statements in the election sample received a positive response from other members of the conversation in 68% of cases, representing a significant increase compared to their equivalent in the random sample (44%).

EXAMPLE OF A STATEMENT THAT RECEIVED A POSITIVE RESPONSE

TRANSLATION: Weynishet Molla along other members of the Blue Party were informed that they were excluded from taking part in this election.

“Why was it important to register 80 political parties and finally allow only 12 of them to run for election?” asked Woynishet Molla.

“We registered those parties according to the direction given by the National Board of Election Coordinator of election.”

Weyenshit Molla and other candidates who were the candidates for blue party of the parliamentary seat were not included in the upcoming election since they lost out a lottery that decide who could stand for election for the parliament seats. Along with Weyenshit Molla, Blen Mesefin, and Amanuel Adugna were out of the game due loss of luck in the lottery. Weyenshit told to Negere Ethiopia that denying the party which in the nationally active and compete for parliament seats, and including less competent as regional parties is a clear sign of how the political system works in the country. Only 12 parties are included in the election in Wereda 17. During the lottery, Weyenshit raised her concerns regarding to the importance of registering and licensing to many parties while only 12 parties were included to compete in the election. The coordinator of the election noted that they registered based on the instruction of the National Electoral Board.

It is learnt that more than 200 Blue party’s members including its leader- Engineer Ylikale Getenet were out of the candidacy for the parliament.
5. CONCLUSION
This first report has offered a preliminary illustration of the dynamics characterizing online debates in Ethiopia. While it builds on a relatively limited evidence base, and more solid and comprehensive conclusions will be drawn in following reports, it nonetheless provides a few indicators that are relevant for understanding both debates on Ethiopian politics and online expression more broadly.

**ETHIOPIAN POLITICS**

- Despite the polarization that has characterized the media in Ethiopia, social media appear to offer greater opportunities for engagement. Statements that dismiss individuals simply because of their affiliation, are offensive, use derogatory tones, or incite hatred do exist but they represent a small percentage of the overall exchanges focusing on Ethiopia.

- Among statements that go against, only a limited number target individuals purely because of their ethnic or religious affiliation. Politics represents by far the most contentious area, where Facebook users are more likely to express antagonism and use strong language.

- A slightly different picture emerges from statements going towards. While politics still forms the most prominent category, statements are more evenly distributed. Individuals thus seem more willing to engage across religious and ethnic divides, towards specific individuals or all Ethiopians in general, without attaching a particular label to their communicative acts.

**ONLINE EXPRESSION**

- Frameworks that are able to locate expressions inciting hatred and calling for violence in the context of overall online debates on a specific country or issue are less likely to exaggerate the significance and risks of extreme forms of expression online such as hate speech. This feature can be particularly relevant at a time when the securitization of domestic and foreign policy is on the rise.

- Analyzing both statements that are ‘going against’ and ‘going towards’ may help to understand where the real risks of online speech exist as well as where the most promising opportunities for engagement lie. It thus offers a chance to different stakeholders to make use and possibly expand existing spaces for dialogue with the help of evidence-based research.

The two following reports will build on the findings of this first report, focusing in more detail on different case studies, the 2015 elections debates and different trends that characterize online discussions focusing on Ethiopia.
END NOTES

1 For a more extensive debate on the meaning and use of Mechachal see, for example, Girma, M. (2012). Understanding Religion and Social Change in Ethiopia: Toward a Hermeneutic of Covenant. Palgrave Macmillan.


7 It should, however, be taken into account that, as this was the first attempt for the team to code “live”, some coders still tended to flag as ‘going against’ criticism that was neither dismissive nor derogatory, but was simply presenting an adversarial perspective.

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