ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, ARTS AND HUMANITIES

SCHOOL OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

BRIDGING ERAS:

FROM RADIO MOSCOW AMHARIC TO SPUTNIK ETHIOPIA: RUSSIA'S MEDIA OUTREACH, SOVIET LEGACIES, AND THE NEW MULTIPOLAR CONTEST

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this thesis is my original work and has been conducted through my own research and academic effort. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis has not previously been submitted, either in whole or in part, for the award of a degree at any other university or academic institution.

All sources, materials, and references consulted during the course of this research have been properly acknowledged and cited.

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This thesis has been submitted for examination with my approval as the University advisor.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolution of Russian international broadcasting in Ethiopia by tracing the transition from the Soviet-era Radio Moscow Amharic service (1961–1993) to Sputnik Ethiopia's contemporary digital presence on Telegram. It explores how Russian media outreach has transformed over time and investigates the continuities and changes between Soviet broadcasting traditions and contemporary digital communication strategies. The study is guided by perspectives from soft power, media imperialism, multipolarity, and postcolonial and decolonial communication studies. A mixed qualitative research approach was employed, combining historical analysis, documentary analysis, and systematic content analysis of 20,828 Telegram messages published by Sputnik Ethiopia between May 2024 and February 2026. The findings show that Sputnik Ethiopia predominantly presents Ethiopia and Africa through positive narratives emphasising development, sovereignty, infrastructure, diplomatic cooperation, and cultural identity. Coverage related to Russia similarly reflects favourable portrayals centred on partnership, strategic cooperation, and shared interests. The study identifies significant continuities with Soviet-era international broadcasting, particularly in the use of anti-colonial themes and development-oriented narratives. However, it also demonstrates important transformations, as Soviet ideological language has largely been replaced by contemporary narratives of multipolarity, strategic partnership, and digitally mediated communication. The research further reveals that a considerable proportion of Sputnik Ethiopia's content consists of translated material originating from Sputnik's English-language services, while audience engagement patterns demonstrate distinctive forms of digital interaction through reactions and emoji-based responses. By providing a longitudinal examination of Sputnik Ethiopia's early digital operation, this study contributes to broader discussions on Russian media engagement in Africa and demonstrates the value of combining historical perspectives with digital content analysis in the study of contemporary international broadcasting.

Keywords: Sputnik Ethiopia, Radio Moscow, soft power, media imperialism, multipolarity, Telegram, Russian media in Africa

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Finally, I acknowledge that any remaining errors, omissions, or shortcomings in this thesis are entirely my own responsibility.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

International broadcasting has for many decades served as a vital mechanism for states to communicate beyond their national borders. Through radio, television, and, more recently, digital media platforms, governments and state-affiliated organisations have historically sought to explain policy positions, promote national interests, develop international relationships, and shape how foreign audiences perceive them. While the underlying technologies and communication environments have evolved dramatically, the central objective of reaching audiences beyond territorial boundaries remains consistent. What once depended heavily on shortwave radio transmission has expanded into digital platforms that facilitate immediate, interactive, and transnational communication.

Within communication studies and international relations, scholars frequently examine these activities through the concept of soft power. Nye (2004) defines soft power as the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than through coercion or force. From this perspective, a nation's culture, political values, and foreign policies become sources of influence when they resonate positively with external audiences. International media, therefore, function not only as channels of information but also as strategic instruments through which states construct national images, communicate preferred interpretations of global events, and seek validation within the international arena.

The relationship between media and foreign policy is also a central concern within the field of public diplomacy. Melissen (2005) argues that contemporary diplomacy extends far beyond formal government-to-government relations, increasingly involving direct engagement with foreign publics. Media organisations, cultural institutions, educational initiatives, and digital networks now serve as critical spaces for states to interact with international audiences. In this context, international broadcasting occupies a unique

intersection of journalism, diplomacy, and strategic communication. Broadcasters do not simply transmit news; they actively participate in wider processes of representation, narrative construction, and global image-building.

Simultaneously, researchers have critiqued international communication through frameworks concerned with global inequalities and the distribution of informational power. Schiller (1976) posited that international communication systems historically mirrored broader political and economic disparities, with powerful states wielding disproportionate capacity to shape global information flows. Similarly, Boyd-Barrett (1977) analysed how transnational media structures created relationships of dependency between developed and developing nations. Although these debates originated during an earlier era of global communication, they remain highly relevant to contemporary discussions regarding media influence, information sovereignty, and competing visions of the international information order (Thussu, 2007).

The Cold War represents a foundational period in the evolution of international broadcasting. Throughout this era, the United States and the Soviet Union invested massive resources into external media services directed at audiences worldwide. Broadcasting became a primary theatre of ideological competition, heavily utilised to export rival political systems, economic models, and interpretations of international affairs. The Soviet Union established an extensive broadcasting network operating in dozens of languages, explicitly targeting newly independent nations across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

Radio Moscow served as the cornerstone of the Soviet Union's international broadcasting apparatus. The Amharic-language service, established in 1961, was a key component of Soviet efforts to engage Ethiopian and wider African audiences during the Cold War. Broadcasts directed at Africa consistently emphasised themes of anti-colonial solidarity, national independence, economic development, educational cooperation, and ideological opposition to Western political dominance (Matusevich, 2007; Patman, 1990; Cummings, 2009). These narratives reflected the polarised environment of the era and the Soviet

Union's broader strategy to cultivate political and cultural allegiance among newly independent states.

Ethiopia occupied a crucial position within this geopolitical landscape. Its historical prominence within Africa, strategic location in the Horn of Africa, and shifting political alliances during the twentieth century made it a focal point for international attention. Foreign broadcasters from both Western and Eastern blocs utilised Amharic-language services to communicate directly with the Ethiopian public. Consequently, international broadcasting became deeply embedded in Ethiopia's experience of global political communication.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 severely diminished Russia's international media presence. Throughout the 1990s, Russian external broadcasting operated on a fraction of its former scale. However, beginning in the early twenty-first century, the Russian Federation initiated a systematic rebuilding of its international communication infrastructure. The launch of RT in 2005 and Sputnik in 2014 signalled a renewed commitment to global media outreach. Russian officials and affiliated institutions explicitly framed these organisations as alternative platforms, designed to challenge the dominant narratives propagated by Western international media (Bjola & Pamment, 2019; Yablokov, 2018).

This revival of international communication has unfolded alongside aggressive diplomatic discourse advocating for a multipolar international order. In this modern environment, state competition extends beyond military and economic metrics to include a battle over narratives, information flows, and symbolic influence. Media platforms are now highly contested spaces where states attempt to define global issues and position themselves favourably within shifting international alliances (Sakwa, 2018).

Meanwhile, Amharic-language international broadcasting continues to thrive within Ethiopia's domestic media landscape. Legacy broadcasters such as Deutsche Welle Amharic (since March 1965), Voice of America Amharic (since September 1982), and

BBC Amharic (as of September 2017) have sustained their engagement with Ethiopian audiences across various technological shifts. In a major strategic development in February 2025, Sputnik announced the expansion of its Amharic-language operations, inaugurating a local editorial presence and production facilities in Addis Ababa (ENA, 2025). This move marked a new operational phase for Russian media in Ethiopia, blending localised production capabilities with advanced digital distribution.

Sputnik Ethiopia disseminates its content across multiple digital platforms, including Telegram, X (formerly Twitter), its proprietary website, and mobile applications. Among these, Telegram provides a uniquely valuable environment for academic research. It offers a publicly accessible, chronological archive of published messages and allows researchers to track communication patterns over time. The platform's architecture facilitates the analysis of thematic priorities, narrative structures, content production practices, and highly visible forms of audience engagement.

The rapid growth of Sputnik Ethiopia intersects with urgent contemporary debates concerning foreign media influence, media pluralism, information sovereignty, and the evolution of international communication in Africa (Wasserman, 2020). Digital technologies have lowered the traditional barriers to entry for international broadcasters, enabling direct communication with local populations without the need for terrestrial broadcasting infrastructure. These affordances have created unprecedented opportunities to study how foreign media actors operate within specific local information environments.

While existing scholarship in Ethiopia and at Addis Ababa University covers public diplomacy, international communication, and media representation, contemporary Russian digital media outreach remains severely under-researched. Previous studies provide excellent insight into how foreign actors generally utilise communication strategies to shape perceptions within Ethiopia. However, the specific, daily communication practices of Sputnik Ethiopia as a digital-first international broadcaster have yet to be thoroughly examined.

This study directly addresses that gap by examining Sputnik Ethiopia's Telegram communication within the broader historical and geopolitical trajectory of Russian international broadcasting. By bridging the historical legacy of Radio Moscow Amharic with contemporary digital practices, the research explores how geopolitical narratives, communication strategies, and audience engagement are negotiated in today's digital information environment.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

International broadcasting commands significant scholarly attention across communication studies, international relations, and public diplomacy. A robust body of literature already examines the historical footprint of Soviet external broadcasting, the modern institutional growth of RT and Sputnik, and the broader relationship between state media and foreign policy. Recently, scholarship has begun exploring Russia's renewed engagement with the African continent through diplomatic, economic, and cultural communication strategies.

Despite this growing academic interest, researchers have devoted surprisingly little attention to the operation of Russian international media organisations within specific African national contexts, particularly concerning local-language digital platforms. The vast majority of research on RT and Sputnik focuses on their global strategies, their impact in Europe and North America, or macro-level questions of Russian disinformation. Consequently, there is a distinct lack of empirical understanding regarding how Russian media organisations localise their communication practices for specific African audiences, and how these strategies evolve over time.

Within Ethiopia, academic research continuously explores public diplomacy, international communication, and digital media behaviour. Scholars such as Mehari (2017), Demisse (2024), Asegidew (2013), and Yusuf and Gezahegn (2025) have provided critical perspectives on diplomacy and the media framing strategies of foreign actors. Likewise, research originating from Addis Ababa University frequently examines

digital platforms, including Telegram, though predominantly through the lenses of educational communication, public relations, and general audience behaviour.

However, the existing literature provides minimal insight into contemporary Russian digital broadcasting targeted explicitly at Ethiopian audiences. While we understand the broad strokes of Russian cultural diplomacy, there is an acute absence of granular, message-level analysis detailing how Sputnik Ethiopia constructs narratives, frames local issues, represents geopolitical actors, and interacts with Amharic-speaking audiences online. This void obscures our understanding of how a major foreign state-affiliated media organisation actually functions day-to-day within Ethiopia's dynamic information ecosystem.

The Ethiopian context demands specific study due to the nation's historical relationship with Soviet broadcasting, its anchor role in African diplomatic affairs, and its rapid adoption of digital communication platforms. During the Cold War, Radio Moscow Amharic was a primary conduit for Soviet perspectives in the Horn of Africa. Today, Sputnik Ethiopia operates in a radically different technological environment, defined by algorithmic distribution, multimedia archives, localised production bureaus, and immediate, visible audience interaction.

A critical secondary gap in the literature concerns the use of Telegram as an instrument of public diplomacy. Unlike traditional broadcasting, Telegram allows media entities to maintain searchable archives, push content directly to mobile devices, and capture real-time engagement metrics. Despite its dominance as an information-sharing platform in Ethiopia, Telegram remains critically under-examined within the study of foreign media influence.

This study resolves these gaps by executing a longitudinal analysis of Sputnik Ethiopia's Telegram archive, analysing 20,828 messages published between 14 May 2024 and 20 February 2026. By systematically evaluating thematic patterns, representation strategies,

production mechanics, and audience-engagement metrics, the research provides a highly detailed empirical account of contemporary Russian digital outreach in Ethiopia.

Rather than relying on abstract geopolitical assumptions regarding Russian media influence, this study grounds its analysis in observable, published content. It connects the historical legacy of Soviet broadcasting with modern digital practices, ultimately enriching broader academic debates on soft power, media dependency, and the shifting architecture of global communication.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

1.3.1 General Objective

The general objective of this study is to examine Sputnik Ethiopia's Telegram communication between 14 May 2024 and 20 February 2026 to understand its dominant themes, narratives, communication practices, and audience-engagement patterns within the broader context of Russian international broadcasting.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

To achieve the general objective, the study seeks to:

1. Examine how Ethiopia is represented and framed within Sputnik Ethiopia's Telegram communication.
2. Identify the continuities and ruptures between Soviet-era Radio Moscow Amharic broadcasting and contemporary Sputnik Ethiopia.
3. Analyse how Sputnik Ethiopia positions Ethiopia within geopolitical narratives advocating for a multipolar international order.
4. Examine Sputnik Ethiopia's communication practices through the dual theoretical lenses of soft power and media imperialism.
5. Assess the evolution of Sputnik Ethiopia's content production practices and audience-engagement patterns over its operational lifespan.

1.4 Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How is Ethiopia represented and framed in Sputnik Ethiopia's Telegram communication?
2. What continuities and changes can be identified between Soviet-era Radio Moscow Amharic broadcasting and the contemporary operations of Sputnik Ethiopia?
3. How does Sputnik Ethiopia position Ethiopia within narratives associated with a multipolar international order?
4. How can Sputnik Ethiopia's communication practices be understood through the perspectives of soft power and media imperialism?
5. How have Sputnik Ethiopia's content production practices and audience-engagement patterns evolved during the study period?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the academic discourse surrounding international communication, public diplomacy, and digital media.

Empirically, it provides rare, granular insight into Sputnik Ethiopia as a rapidly emerging actor within the Ethiopian media landscape. While established Western broadcasters like the BBC, Voice of America, and Deutsche Welle have been extensively studied, the specific digital tactics of Sputnik Ethiopia have remained largely unmapped.

Historically, the research expands our understanding of Russian international broadcasting by placing contemporary digital tactics on a historical continuum. By bridging the eras of Radio Moscow Amharic and Sputnik Ethiopia, the study illuminates how state-sponsored broadcasting adapts to profound geopolitical shifts and technological breakthroughs.

Theoretically, the study advances debates on soft power and media imperialism by applying them simultaneously to a modern digital network. These frameworks offer

competing yet complementary insights: soft power accounts for the mechanisms of attraction and relationship-building, while media imperialism exposes structural dependencies and centralised editorial control. Testing both frameworks against Sputnik Ethiopia allows for a nuanced assessment of how influence and dependency operate in tandem.

For Ethiopian media scholars, practitioners, and policymakers, this research documents the exact mechanisms through which a foreign state-affiliated organisation leverages localised digital platforms. As traditional broadcasting models give way to direct-to-mobile digital distribution, understanding these foreign representation and engagement strategies is increasingly vital for safeguarding information sovereignty.

Ultimately, the study serves as a contemporary case study of the changing international information order, demonstrating how history, algorithmic technology, geopolitics, and digital audience engagement converge in the modern media ecosystem.

1.6 Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study focuses exclusively on the official Telegram channel of Sputnik Ethiopia, analysing content published over a 21-month period between 14 May 2024 and 20 February 2026. The research evaluates the thematic priorities, framing techniques, production mechanics, and observable audience-engagement metrics present in the channel's output during this timeframe.

Geographically, the study is firmly situated within the Ethiopian media environment. While Sputnik Ethiopia frequently covers regional and global events, the analysis prioritises communication specifically packaged and distributed in Amharic for Ethiopian audiences. The core concern is how the platform operates within Ethiopia's domestic information space.

Conceptually, the investigation is delimited to the intersections of international broadcasting, public diplomacy, soft power, media dependency, and digital

communication. It zeroes in on how Sputnik Ethiopia constructs geopolitical narratives and interacts with its subscriber base.

Platform-wise, the study is strictly delimited to Telegram. While Sputnik Ethiopia maintains a multi-platform presence (including a website, X, and mobile applications), Telegram was selected because its architecture provides a reliable, chronological, and publicly accessible archive ideally suited for longitudinal computational content analysis.

Analytically, the research examines *published communication* and *platform-side engagement indicators* (views and emoji reactions). It does not attempt to measure cognitive effects, shifts in public opinion, or behavioural changes among the Ethiopian populace. The focus remains squarely on the nature of the broadcasted messages and the immediate, observable platform engagement.

Finally, while the thesis discusses Russian foreign policy to contextualise media narratives, it does not attempt to provide a comprehensive political science analysis of bilateral Russia–Ethiopia relations.

1.7 Limitation of the Study

Like any empirical undertaking, this study has limitations that must be acknowledged.

First, by isolating Telegram, the findings capture communication patterns specific to that app's ecosystem. They do not account for variations in editorial strategy that Sputnik Ethiopia may employ on its website, Facebook, or X accounts.

Second, the methodology relies primarily on content and engagement analysis. While this is highly effective for mapping narratives and measuring platform interactivity, it cannot definitively prove how individual users cognitively process the messages or whether the broadcasting achieves its persuasive goals.

Third, the analysis is based entirely on externally observable data. The researcher did not have access to Sputnik Ethiopia's internal editorial guidelines, budget allocations, or strategic directives. Consequently, conclusions regarding the organisation's intent are inferred from the published content rather than leaked internal documentation.

Fourth, Telegram's engagement metrics present inherent analytical boundaries. While views and emoji reactions confirm that interaction occurred, the platform anonymises user demographic data. The study cannot determine the age, location, or political affiliation of the engaged users, nor can it definitively interpret the complex psychological motivations behind specific emoji usage.

Finally, the digital landscape is inherently volatile. The data reflects Sputnik Ethiopia's strategies during its foundational operational period; these tactics may shift as the organisation matures or as geopolitical circumstances change.

1.8 Organisation of the Study

This thesis is structured into six chapters.

Chapter One introduces the study by establishing the background, identifying the research problem, stating the objectives and questions, and outlining the significance, scope, and limitations of the research.

Chapter Two reviews the relevant literature and establishes the theoretical framework. It synthesises scholarship on soft power, media imperialism, multipolarity, the historical trajectory of Soviet/Russian broadcasting, and the role of digital platforms in public diplomacy.

Chapter Three details the methodology. It explains the research design, data collection procedures (including Python-based extraction of the Telegram dataset), coding processes, analytical approaches, and ethical considerations.

Chapter Four presents the empirical findings derived from the 20,828 Telegram messages. It maps thematic priorities, narrative framing, content production evolution, and the specific mechanics of audience engagement.

Chapter Five discusses and interprets these findings. It synthesises the empirical data with the theoretical frameworks established in Chapter Two, answering the research questions and assessing Sputnik Ethiopia's position within the geopolitical media landscape.

Chapter Six provides a comprehensive summary of the research. It synthesises the major conclusions, outlines the study's unique contributions to academic knowledge, and offers practical recommendations for policymakers, media practitioners, and future researchers.

CHAPTER TWO:
LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Analysing Sputnik Ethiopia's digital broadcasting on Telegram requires a firm grounding in international communication and geopolitical theory. This chapter explores the conceptual frameworks guiding the research; soft power, public diplomacy, media imperialism, and multipolarity viewed through a postcolonial lens, and aligns them with the core research questions. It then synthesises the empirical literature, tracing the historical legacy of Soviet media in Africa up to Russia's contemporary digital broadcasting strategies. A review of local studies on foreign public diplomacy in Ethiopia highlights the specific research gaps this thesis aims to fill.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Soft power and public diplomacy are now foundational to understanding international broadcasting. They explain how states cultivate influence abroad via attraction, persuasion, and relationship-building instead of military or economic coercion. Rapidly expanding communication technologies and interconnected audiences have pushed media organisations to the forefront of these diplomatic processes.

Joseph Nye (1990) coined "soft power" to describe the ability to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion. Stripped of the military or economic threats characteristic of hard power, soft power relies on the inherent appeal of a nation's culture, political values, institutions, and foreign policy. When foreign audiences view these elements positively, states can achieve their strategic goals through voluntary acceptance rather than forced compliance (Nye, 2004). Communication naturally acts as the delivery mechanism for projecting these images and cultivating favourable international perceptions.

While intimately tied to soft power, public diplomacy zeros in on direct communication between states and foreign publics. Traditional diplomacy historically revolved around closed-door negotiations between official government representatives. Public diplomacy breaks that mould, extending engagement directly to citizens, civil society, educational institutions, and media audiences (Melissen, 2005). This shift transforms diplomacy into a highly communicative, socially embedded practice.

Contemporary public diplomacy has largely moved away from the one-way information dissemination models of the past, now prioritising dialogue and long-term relationship-building (Melissen, 2005). Nicholas Cull (2008) breaks this down into several core dimensions: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting. The latter remains uniquely powerful, granting states continuous, large-scale, and direct access to foreign populations.

The digital era has radically amplified this broadcasting capability. Social media, online news, mobile apps, and streaming platforms allow states to bypass traditional media gatekeepers entirely. Audiences no longer just consume; they respond, share, and reinterpret content in real time within highly interactive environments.

To understand the structural inequalities governing these global media systems, scholars often turn to the media imperialism framework. Emerging from concerns that international communication reflects and reinforces entrenched political and economic power imbalances, this theory scrutinises the unequal flow of information. Herbert Schiller (1976) famously argued that dominant Western media institutions largely dictate how global events are represented and interpreted.

Expanding on this, Boyd-Barrett (1977) pointed to transnational media flows as the source of asymmetrical relationships between media-producing centres and media-consuming regions. Information rarely circulates evenly. Instead, it cascades from a handful of powerful hubs down to the rest of the world, sparking persistent debates over representation, cultural dependency, and influence.

Yet, the media imperialism thesis faces valid pushback. The global landscape is no longer an exclusively Western domain. Alternative production centres, most notably in Russia and China, have fractured this monopoly (Thussu, 2007). These state actors aggressively participate in "contra-flow" communication, injecting alternative narratives and interpretations into the international bloodstream. This tension between entrenched dominance and disruptive counter-narratives provides the exact lens needed to analyse how Russian media outlets position themselves today.

2.2 Multipolarity, Postcolonial and Decolonial Communication Frameworks

Multipolarity is now a dominant theme in both international relations and global communication. It describes the fragmentation of unipolar or bipolar systems into a distributed order where multiple power centres coexist and compete. Crucially, this power is not strictly military or economic; it is inherently informational and technological. International broadcasters and digital media platforms are the primary battlegrounds where states vie for position within this plural global environment.

Unlike the rigid ideological bipolarity of the Cold War, the contemporary international system is intensely fluid. Richard Sakwa (2018) observes that the post-Cold War era has birthed a complex configuration where emerging economies and non-Western states aggressively assert their geopolitical presence. Here, communication does not just reflect power; it constructs, contests, and legitimises it.

Russian foreign policy actively champions multipolarity as both a normative ideal and a strategic objective, presenting it as a balanced, equitable antidote to Western unipolarity. State-affiliated networks like RT and Sputnik are officially marketed as contributors to global informational diversity. Regardless of whether this is viewed as genuine pluralism or cynical strategic messaging, the discourse itself highlights how deeply communication is tied to the architecture of the global order.

To critically examine these broadcasting efforts in the Global South, postcolonial and decolonial theories offer vital analytical leverage. Postcolonial theory unpacks the enduring legacy of colonial power in cultural production and media representation. Global media flows have historically privileged Western perspectives, actively marginalising voices from regions like Africa (Wasserman, 2020). This asymmetry goes beyond economics or technology; it is fundamentally epistemic, dictating what qualifies as legitimate knowledge and whose voices carry authority.

Decolonial frameworks take this further, noting that colonial knowledge structures easily survive formal political independence. International communication is never a neutral exchange; it is a battleground for competing worldviews. Media narratives either reinforce or subvert established hierarchies. The recent expansion of non-Western broadcasters, such as Russian networks in Africa, sits right at this fault line. They can be read as a victory for informational plurality or simply the imposition of a new, alternative form of external influence.

African media systems are heavily shaped by these unequal power relations, with external actors historically holding disproportionate control over how African realities are broadcast globally. Yet, African audiences are far from passive receptacles. They actively interpret, negotiate, and resist these mediated narratives. Capturing this dynamic interaction between foreign messaging and local reception is crucial.

Sputnik Ethiopia operates precisely at the crossroads of multipolar geopolitics and postcolonial communication. It actively broadcasts narratives championing a shifting global order free from Western hegemony, while simultaneously navigating an Ethiopian media landscape deeply conscious of historical dependency and representation politics. Combining these theories allows for a multidimensional analysis: multipolarity explains the geopolitical positioning of the content, while postcolonial perspectives reveal how power and historical legacies are negotiated within the messages themselves.

2.3 Integration of Theoretical Frameworks with Research Questions

Relying on a single theory cannot fully capture Sputnik Ethiopia's digital behaviour. Instead, this research weaves together soft power, public diplomacy, media imperialism, multipolarity, and postcolonial frameworks. Treated as complementary lenses rather than competing explanations, they provide a holistic mechanism for dissecting the network's broadcasting practices.

The first research question, investigating the discursive construction of Ethiopia and Africa on Telegram, leans heavily on soft power and decolonial thought. Soft power helps identify tactics of attraction and image-building, while the decolonial lens exposes whether these modern narratives inadvertently reproduce historical hierarchies of representation.

Evaluating the continuities and ruptures between Cold War-era Radio Moscow Amharic and today's Sputnik operations (the second research question) requires a historical-institutional approach. This involves tracking structural shifts, linguistic strategies, and the evolution of thematic intent across different eras of Russian state media.

The third question addresses multipolarity head-on, investigating how Ethiopia is framed within Russia's broader geopolitical vision. By mapping where Ethiopia sits within narratives of shifting global power dynamics, the study illustrates how daily digital media output actively constructs international relations meaning.

Exploring the tension between attraction-based influence and structural power asymmetry drives the fourth question. Testing Sputnik Ethiopia's output simultaneously against soft power and media imperialism theories reveals whether the network functions strictly as a mechanism of persuasion, a blunt instrument of dependency, or a complex hybrid of the two.

Finally, the fifth question looks at platform mechanics, tracking the evolution of content strategies over the network's initial operational period. Grounded in digital media theory, this analysis examines how editorial decisions are shaped by Telegram's specific affordances, such as its chronological broadcasting structure and emoji-based reaction architecture. Together, these integrated frameworks form the analytical backbone for the empirical analysis that follows.

2.4 Review of Related Empirical Literature

Long before algorithms and digital platforms, international radio broadcasting served as a primary artery for global political communication. During the ideological crucible of the Cold War, external broadcasting evolved into a vital state instrument for shaping foreign public opinion (Cummings, 2010; Patman, 1990). The United States and the Soviet Union poured massive resources into multi-lingual networks targeting audiences in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

The rapid wave of post-war decolonisation turned Africa into a highly contested informational theatre. With the political trajectories of newly independent states in flux, foreign powers used broadcasting to vie for alignment. The Soviet Union invested heavily here; Radio Moscow rapidly expanded its African services to brand the USSR as the ultimate partner in technological development and anti-colonial solidarity. Broadcasters continuously pushed narratives of national independence, rapid economic modernisation, and fierce resistance to Western imperial dominance (Matusevich, 2007).

Ethiopia became a focal point in 1961 with the launch of Radio Moscow's Amharic service. By broadcasting directly in the local lingua franca, the network delivered heavily curated news and political commentary emphasising solidarity between Moscow and the developing world. While the Cold War architecture collapsed decades ago, the strategic blueprint established then, specifically the aggressive use of localised language broadcasting as a vector for state influence, survives intact within modern Russian media strategies.

Today, scholars widely view state-affiliated networks like RT and Sputnik as the digital successors to these Cold War operations. Bjola and Pamment (2019) note that these platforms are central to Russia's concerted push to project influence far beyond the confines of traditional diplomacy. They aggressively market themselves as "alternative" voices determined to puncture dominant Western narratives (Sakwa, 2018). While some observers see this as a necessary diversification of the global media landscape, critics maintain that these networks operate purely as weaponised instruments of state geopolitical strategy.

Domestically, researchers at Addis Ababa University are actively charting the intersection of digital technology and public diplomacy. Mehari (2017) analysed how Ethiopian diplomatic missions leverage Facebook for national image-building, while Gezahegn (2025) explored the public diplomacy strategies deployed by American Corners in Ethiopia during periods of severe political tension. Collectively, this body of work underscores a growing academic consensus: digital communication is now indistinguishable from diplomatic practice in the Horn of Africa.

2.5 Empirical Positioning: Similarities, Differences, and Research Gaps

Evaluating this thesis against recent institutional research at Addis Ababa University clarifies its exact contribution. The study shares its theoretical DNA with local scholarship; works by Mehari (2017) and Gezahegn (2025) have already proven how critical digital technologies are to modern diplomatic engagement in Ethiopia. Furthermore, media framing analyses by Asegidew (2013) and Yusuf (2019) have thoroughly documented how international and domestic networks clash over global narratives. This thesis builds on their premise that foreign actors routinely bypass official channels to court the Ethiopian public directly.

However, the existing literature skews heavily toward evaluating either indigenous Ethiopian diplomatic efforts or established Western outreach programmes. A review of the AAU repository reveals four glaring research deficits:

- **The Subject Gap:** Academic analysis of contemporary Russian broadcasting in Ethiopia is almost non-existent. Sputnik Ethiopia's arrival as a fully localised digital operation represents uncharted territory.
- **The Platform Gap:** Local studies frequently mention Telegram, but almost entirely in the context of domestic education or basic public relations. Its utility as a high-volume, cross-border conduit for foreign public diplomacy remains practically unmapped.
- **The Methodological Gap:** Much of the existing literature relies on highly restricted qualitative case studies or brief sampling windows. This project introduces a large-scale, computational longitudinal approach, processing thousands of messages to track narrative drift over nearly two years.
- **The Empirical Gap:** Sputnik Ethiopia deploys native digital tactics, such as aggregated emoji-sentiment metrics, AI-generated imagery, and cross-lingual navigational loops, that have yet to be catalogued or analysed by media scholars in the region.

By targeting these precise blind spots, the current study bridges the archival history of Soviet radio with the immediate, chaotic reality of modern algorithmic state messaging in the Horn of Africa.

CHAPTER THREE:
METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the methodological approach used to examine the evolution, content, framing practices, and audience engagement patterns of Sputnik Ethiopia's Telegram channel between 14 May 2024 and 20 February 2026. Combining historical review with systematic digital content analysis, the research relies primarily on qualitative interpretation, supported where appropriate by quantitative indicators. The chapter outlines the research design, sources of data, collection and processing procedures, coding categories, phase-based analytical framework, reliability measures, and ethical considerations. The following sections detail how these procedures were executed to build the empirical foundation for Chapter Four.

3.1 Research Approach and Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach, augmented by targeted quantitative measures. Two complementary strands of inquiry drive the research. The first examines the historical experience of Soviet international broadcasting in Africa, paying particular attention to Radio Moscow's Amharic-language service. This aspect draws on published historical research and scholarly literature dealing with Cold War media, international broadcasting, and Soviet-African relations.

The second strand focuses on Sputnik Ethiopia's contemporary digital operations through the systematic analysis of a Telegram archive containing 20,828 messages published between May 2024 and February 2026. This archive provided a unique opportunity to observe communication practices over an extended period, tracing shifts in editorial priorities, thematic emphasis, and audience engagement.

Telegram was selected for its continuous, publicly accessible record of channel activity. Crucially for longitudinal analysis, the platform preserves vital contextual metadata: publication dates, reactions, media attachments, and forwarding histories.

While the study is primarily interpretive, quantitative indicators helped identify broader trends. Message frequencies, reaction totals, posting intensity, and proportions of translated content were examined alongside qualitative observations of framing, narrative construction, ideological positioning, and communication strategy. Established principles of qualitative content analysis informed the overall approach, particularly those relating to transparency, consistency, and systematic coding procedures (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017; Schreier, 2012).

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 The Study Corpus (Digital Trace Data)

In traditional social science research, primary data typically refers to information generated through direct human interaction, such as interviews or surveys. In media and communication studies, however, media texts serve as the primary empirical object (Neuendorf, 2017). Consequently, the principal dataset for this research comprises naturally occurring digital trace data collected from the official Sputnik Ethiopia Telegram channel (@sputnik_ethiopia).

Spanning 14 May 2024 to 20 February 2026, the archive was exported using Telegram Desktop's built-in export function in JSON format. After service notifications and empty records were removed, the final dataset comprised of of 20,828 messages across 648 days. The archive retained various metadata fields, including message identification numbers, publication dates, textual content, text entities, media attachments, reaction counts, reply references, and forwarding information.

No attempt was made to collect personal subscriber information. Usernames, phone numbers, and other identifying details were neither accessed nor recorded. The analysis

relied solely on publicly visible content and aggregated engagement metrics available through the channel itself.

3.2.2 Contextual and Historical Sources

A range of secondary literature and contextual documents supported the primary data. These included scholarly works on Soviet international broadcasting, Cold War communication, soft power, public diplomacy, media imperialism, multipolarity, and postcolonial or decolonial approaches to communication. Publicly available Russian policy statements relating to Sputnik and RT were consulted alongside milestone announcements and audience indicators visible on Telegram. These materials primarily provided historical context to support the interpretation of contemporary findings emerging from the archive.

3.3 Data Processing and Chunking Procedure

The research employed Python-assisted extraction scripts to process the exported JSON archive. Given the sheer size of the dataset, the material was divided into 84 sequential analytical chunks containing roughly 248 messages each. Breaking the archive into smaller analytical units made the data far more manageable while preserving its chronological order, allowing changes over time to be tracked systematically.

Chunking also minimised the risk of missing subtle shifts in content strategy or narrative emphasis. The final chunk contained fewer messages, simply comprising the remaining balance of the archive. A structured HTML analytical report was produced for each chunk. These reports blended automatically extracted quantitative data with manual qualitative coding and interpretation, capturing engagement patterns, thematic trends, geographical references, reaction distributions, and narrative framing observations. To maintain transparency and provide a clear audit trail, all chunk reports and coding records were retained throughout the project.

3.4 Coding Scheme and Analytical Variables

The research questions and the theoretical perspectives discussed in Chapter Two informed the coding categories. Preliminary categories were drafted before full analysis commenced, then refined during a pilot examination of the first three analytical chunks. This pilot phase helped clarify coding decisions and ensure the analytical framework aligned tightly with the research objectives. Ultimately, the final coding scheme comprised ten major analytical categories.

Structural metrics tracked total message counts, text-only posts, media posts, replies, posts containing reactions, and message-frequency patterns. Geographic and institutional references were coded based on mentions of Ethiopia, Russia, African countries, Western nations, and international organisations such as the African Union (AU), BRICS, NATO, the United Nations (UN), and the European Union (EU).

Russia-related content was categorised by positive, neutral, or negative framing. Positive framing included representations of cooperation, strength, partnership, or diplomatic success; negative framing covered criticism, conflict, failure, or victimisation. Ethiopia-related content was similarly evaluated. Positive Ethiopian framing highlighted development, diplomacy, infrastructure achievements, culture, and sovereignty, whereas negative framing captured conflict, disasters, accidents, or crises.

Messages containing the phrase "በእንግሊዘኛ ያንብቡ" ("read in English") were flagged as translated or repackaged material originating from Sputnik's English-language services. Similarly, phrases like "በሰው ሠራሽ አስተውሎት" identified AI-assisted or AI-generated visual content. Original productions, such as interviews, podcasts, and locally produced discussion programmes, were coded separately from republished material.

Source attribution was another key metric. Posts were scrutinised to see if information was attributed to Russian officials, Ethiopian officials, Western officials, experts, analysts,

media organisations, or unnamed sources. Mapping these patterns helped identify which voices and authorities the channel amplified most frequently.

Reaction data extracted from the Telegram archive served as a proxy for audience engagement. The analysis tallied reactions such as ❤️‍🩹, 😁, 👍, 👏, 🩸, 🙏, 😳, 🤣, and 👎. Beyond raw frequencies, the context surrounding these reactions was carefully noted. During the coding process, the 😁 emoji frequently appeared in situations suggesting scepticism, irony, or sarcasm, particularly in response to ambitious political announcements and economic claims.

Publicly visible audience reach indicators were also monitored to gauge broader audience activity. While Telegram restricts complete analytics access for external researchers, observable patterns indicated that engagement usually peaked shortly after publication. Measurable interaction predominantly occurred within the first twenty-four hours, reflecting the fast-paced nature of news consumption on the platform.

3.5 Reliability and Transparency

Because a single researcher undertook the coding and interpretation, maintaining consistency was paramount. Before commencing analysis of the full dataset, a robust coding framework was developed to guide classification decisions and establish strict criteria for each category. A pilot review of the first three chunks tested the categories in practice, allowing for the refinement of definitions wherever ambiguities surfaced.

To reduce human error in counting and recording, Python-assisted extraction handled the retrieval and organisation of quantitative metrics. Conversely, interpretive judgements concerning framing, themes, and narrative patterns rested entirely with the researcher. Retaining chunk-level analyses, coding logs, and supporting documentation ensured an auditable trail. By keeping automated data-processing strictly separate from qualitative

interpretation, the methodological basis of each finding can be traced clearly throughout the study.

3.6 Phased Aggregation and Longitudinal Analysis

Upon completing the chunk-level analysis, the 84 analytical units were aggregated into eight broader operational phases. This macro-level view facilitated the identification of long-term developments much easier to spot, highlighting structural shifts in content strategy that individual chunks might obscure.

Major milestones in Sputnik Ethiopia's development dictated the phase boundaries. The official opening of the organisation's Addis Ababa bureau on 19 February 2025 marked a significant institutional transition, so the period immediately preceding it was treated as a distinct phase. Subsequent phases tracked the channel's first year of operation post-launch, facilitating direct comparisons between pre-launch and post-launch activity.

Table 3.1: Operational Phases of Sputnik Ethiopia's Telegram Channel

Phase	Phase Name	Dates	Days	Messages	Avg per Day	Key Characteristics
1	Pre-Launch 1	14 May – 31 Jul 2024	79	1,730	21.9	Channel establishment; predominantly original Amharic content; no

Table 3.1: Operational Phases of Sputnik Ethiopia's Telegram Channel

Phase	Phase Name	Dates	Days	Messages	Avg per Day	Key Characteristics
						translated or AI material; rising engagement
2	Pre-Launch 2	1 Aug – 31 Oct 2024	92	2,324	25.3	First "በእንግሊዘኛ" marker observed; translated content begins; engagement increases
3	Pre-Launch 3	1 Nov 2024 – 31 Jan 2025	92	2,347	25.5	Growth in translated content; recurring use of the 😁 reaction became more consistently observable

Table 3.1: Operational Phases of Sputnik Ethiopia's Telegram Channel

Phase	Phase Name	Dates	Days	Messages	Avg per Day	Key Characteristics
4	Immediate Pre-Launch	1 Feb – 18 Feb 2025	18	455	25.3	Final pre-launch period coinciding with AU summit activity in Addis Ababa
5	Post-Launch Period 1	19 Feb – 30 Apr 2025	71	2,118	29.8	Official bureau opening; first AI-labelled imagery; translated content surpasses 2,000 cumulative posts
6	Post-Launch Period 2	1 May – 31 Jul 2025	92	3,479	37.8	Expansion of AI-labelled visuals and podcast-style programming; extensive Iran–

Table 3.1: Operational Phases of Sputnik Ethiopia's Telegram Channel

Phase	Phase Name	Dates	Days	Messages	Avg per Day	Key Characteristics
						Israel conflict coverage
7	Post-Launch Period 3	1 Aug – 31 Oct 2025	92	3,601	39.1	Highest output phase; GERD inauguration; Russia–Ethiopia nuclear partnership; launch of radio broadcasting
8	Post-Launch Period 4 & Anniversary Extension	1 Nov 2025 – 20 Feb 2026	112	4,774	42.6	Longest phase; increased Africa-focused coverage; continued audience expansion

Beyond editorial output, publicly visible indicators pointed to a steady rise in audience reach and engagement over the study period. Rather than acting as precise audience measurements, these observations served as contextual indicators of the channel's growth trajectory. In Table 3.2, the tilde symbol (~) strictly denotes an approximate value, reflecting the natural fluctuation of real-time digital subscriber metrics.

Table 3.2: Observed Audience Growth Trends by Phase

Phase	Approximate Audience Size	Relative Reach Trend	Observed Engagement Trend
1	~1,400	Low	Predominantly original Amharic production with limited initial reach
2	~4,700	Moderate growth	Introduction of translated Russian content and increasing engagement levels
3	~6,500	Moderate growth	Continued audience expansion and content diversification
4	~7,100	Growing	Pre-launch anticipation and AU summit visibility

Table 3.2: Observed Audience Growth Trends by Phase

Phase	Approximate Audience Size	Relative Reach Trend	Observed Engagement Trend
5	~11,500	Growing	Expansion associated with bureau launch and AI multimedia rollout
6	~18,000	Strong growth	Podcast and AI content expansion increased interaction levels
7	Above 30,000	High	Peak content output and launch of radio broadcasting
8	Above 45,000	High	Sustained high-volume production and continued audience growth

The estimates in Table 3.2 stem from observations of publicly visible Telegram indicators made during the study. They act as approximate representations of audience trends rather than independently verified statistics. Their primary purpose is to illustrate broad patterns of growth and engagement, not to offer exact numerical measurements.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was maintained throughout the research process. The study adhered strictly to the ethical guidelines of Addis Ababa University's School of Media and Communication and generally accepted principles for internet research.

Because the Telegram channel is a public broadcast platform, no covert observation or access to private communications occurred. The analysis was strictly confined to openly available content and aggregated reaction data visible to any user.

At no point were subscriber identities, usernames, telephone numbers, or other personal details collected, stored, or disclosed. By focusing exclusively on publicly available content and observable engagement indicators, the research respected user privacy. The findings generated through these procedures are presented and analysed in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER FOUR:
EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This chapter sets out the empirical findings drawn from the analysis of Sputnik Ethiopia's Telegram channel between May 2024 and February 2026. The results map directly onto the primary analytical areas established in Chapter Three: message volume and structural evolution, audience engagement trajectories, shifting thematic priorities, the framing of Russia, and sentiment surrounding Ethiopian and African affairs. Furthermore, the analysis traces changes in content-production practices, such as the adoption of AI-generated imagery, alongside distinct emoji-use patterns and the visible impact of major geopolitical events on editorial output.

Data tables throughout the chapter facilitate direct comparisons across the study's eight operational phases. Framing and sentiment classifications rely on the manual coding framework outlined in the methodology. Where posts conveyed mixed or ambiguous signals, they underwent multiple reviews before a final coding decision was applied. A brief note of caution is required regarding emoji reactions: whilst these patterns offer vital clues about audience behaviour, emojis do not explicitly articulate a user's internal motivation and thus serve as an indirect, rather than absolute, measure of public sentiment.

4.1 Message Volume and Structural Evolution

Output surged considerably over the 648-day study window. Sputnik Ethiopia published 20,828 messages in total, translating to a daily average of approximately 32 posts. The core volume and structural indicators are detailed in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Message volume and structural metrics by phase

Phase	Messages	Days	Msgs/day	Text msgs (%)	Reactions (%)	Zero-reaction (%)	Blockquotes (%)	Videos (%)	Photos (%)
1: Pre-Launch 1	1,730	79	21.9	81.5%	58.0%	42.0%	14.0%	13.6%	21.7%
2: Pre-Launch 2	2,324	92	25.3	73.0%	71.1%	28.9%	1.5%	15.5%	17.6%
3: Pre-Launch 3	2,347	92	25.5	71.6%	67.3%	32.7%	0.9%	16.2%	14.9%
4: Immediate Pre-Lau	455	18	25.3	64.8%	47.9%	52.1%	0.4%	19.8%	16.5%

Table 4.1: Message volume and structural metrics by phase

Phase	Messages	Days	Msgs/day	Text msgs (%)	Reactions (%)	Zero-reaction (%)	Blockquotes (%)	Videos (%)	Photos (%)
nch									
5: Post-Launch Period 1	2,118	71	29.8	70.3%	71.3%	28.7%	8.5%	15.1%	14.6%
6: Post-Launch Period 2	3,479	92	37.8	74.3%	79.1%	20.9%	18.6%	19.9%	15.3%
7: Post-Launch Period 3	3,601	92	39.1	76.9%	81.8%	18.2%	28.6%	25.1%	21.2%

Table 4.1: Message volume and structural metrics by phase

Phase	Messages	Days	Msgs/day	Text msgs (%)	Reactions (%)	Zero-reaction (%)	Blockquotes (%)	Videos (%)	Photos (%)
8: Post-Launch Period 4 & Anniv. Ext.	4,774	112	42.6	79.4%	84.6%	15.4%	25.0%	23.6%	23.7%
Total / Average	**20,828**	**648**	**~32**	**~75%**	**~72%**	**~28%**	**~15%**	**~19%**	**~18%**

Source: Calculated by the researcher from the Sputnik Ethiopia Telegram archive (May 2024–February 2026).

The acceleration in content delivery is stark. From roughly 22 posts per day in the initial phase, output nearly doubled to 43 per day by Phase 8. Audience engagement mirrored this upward trajectory. In Phase 1, barely half of the channel's posts elicited a reaction.

By the final phase, that figure had climbed to almost 85 per cent. Conversely, posts ignored entirely by the audience shrank from 42 per cent down to just 15 per cent; a clear indication of an expanding, highly active subscriber base.

Editorial framing mechanics also evolved. During the pre-launch window (Phases 2–4), blockquotes featured in fewer than 2 per cent of posts. However, their use spiked dramatically in Phases 6 and 7, appearing in nearly 30 per cent of all updates. This shift coincided with heavy reliance on lengthy, attributed official statements during critical international events, including the Iran–Israel conflict and the Russia–Africa Ministerial Forum. Visually, videos and photographs consistently made up between 35 and 45 per cent of all material, creeping upward in later phases as AI-generated imagery became a regular feature.

4.2 Reaction Metrics and Engagement Growth

The ways in which the audience interacted with the channel transformed drastically. As shown in Table 4.2, average reactions per message leapt from a mere 2.77 in Phase 1 to a peak of 33.0 in Phase 7. Although this average settled slightly to 21.7 in the final phase, baseline engagement remained over seven times higher than when the channel first launched.

Table 4.2: Reaction metrics by phase

Phase	Total reactions	Avg. reactions (all msgs)	Avg. reactions (reacted msgs)	Median reactions	Maximum reactions (single post)
1	4,794	2.77	4.78	1	16
2	17,062	7.34	10.3	5	51
3	16,420	7.00	10.4	5	58
4	1,934	4.25	8.87	5	42
5	27,800	13.1	18.4	10	92
6	62,319	17.9	22.6	12	127
7	118,898	33.0	40.4	22	129

Table 4.2: Reaction metrics by phase

Phase	Total reactions	Avg. reactions (all msgs)	Avg. reactions (reacted msgs)	Median reactions	Maximum reactions (single post)
8	103,400	21.7	25.6	15	71
Total / Avg.	**352,627**	**~17**	**~22**	**—**	**129**

Audience attention reached its peak during Phase 7. Fuelled by sweeping coverage of the GERD inauguration, the political upheaval in Madagascar, and the Gaza ceasefire negotiations, this period married acute domestic interests with significant geopolitical shifts.

Interestingly, the single most-reacted post across the entire 20-month archive had nothing to do with international diplomacy. Racking up 129 reactions, it announced the death of Grand Mufti Hajji Umar Idris (ID 15761). This outpouring of grief suggests the channel's reach extends into deeply rooted cultural and religious spheres, transcending standard political divides.

Consistently, domestic news outperformed international affairs in terms of pure engagement. In Phase 8, for instance, posts focused on Ethiopia generated an average of 27 reactions, compared to 19 for Russia-centric updates and 18 for Ukraine-related news.

Clearly, domestic relevance remained the primary hook for subscribers, even as Sputnik expanded its global reporting.

4.3 Geographic and Thematic Focus

4.3.1 Africa and Ethiopia Coverage

As the channel matured, it pivoted heavily towards regional news. Table 4.3 illustrates how references to Africa, which hovered around 46 per cent in Phase 1, dominated the feed by Phase 8, comprising 73 per cent of all output. Content dedicated specifically to Ethiopia quadrupled, rising from a modest 5 per cent to over 22 per cent.

Table 4.3: Africa and Ethiopia mentions by phase

Phase	Africa msgs	Africa %	Ethiopia msgs	Ethiopia %
1	799	46.2%	87	5.0%
2	820	35.3%	175	7.5%
3	780	33.2%	213	9.1%
4	210	46.2%	70	15.4%

Table 4.3: Africa and Ethiopia mentions by phase

Phase	Africa msgs	Africa %	Ethiopia msgs	Ethiopia %
5	955	45.1%	384	18.1%
6	1,368	39.3%	552	15.9%
7	2,418	67.2%	748	20.8%
8	3,485	73.0%	1,057	22.1%

Sputnik's broader African coverage repeatedly spotlighted South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Somalia. The Sahel region received outsized attention. Across the latter half of the study, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger accounted for 10–12 per cent of all Africa-related messaging. Reporting on these states overwhelmingly framed their recent political shifts as acts of sovereignty, highlighting the rejection of French influence in favour of deepening security ties with Moscow.

Conversely, mentions of Egypt were inextricably linked to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Coverage of Cairo’s demands for compensation and water security guarantees generated highly charged audience reactions, a phenomenon explored further in Section 4.6.

4.3.2 Russia and Other Major Powers

Unsurprisingly, Russia remained a foundational pillar of the channel's output. While dipping to 23 per cent during the brief AU summit coverage (Phase 4), mentions of Russia rebounded aggressively, appearing in 76 per cent of all messages by Phase 8.

The United States served as the primary geopolitical antagonist in the channel's narrative framework, appearing in 10–15 per cent of all posts. Reports focusing on Washington routinely centred on sanctions, diplomatic discord, and competing foreign policy objectives. China, on the other hand, was framed through a lens of multipolar cooperation. Mentions of Beijing spiked between Phases 5 and 8, driven by coverage of BRICS expansion and infrastructure investments in the Global South. Ukraine was discussed almost exclusively in the context of the ongoing conflict, peaking noticeably during the Kursk incursion (Phase 2) and subsequent negotiation efforts (Phase 7).

4.4 Framing of Russia and Sentiment for Africa/Ethiopia

4.4.1 Framing of Russia

Table 4.4 tracks the specific framing of Russia-related content. A positive framing bias was not merely present; it was overwhelming. Across the entire archive, 91 per cent of posts mentioning Russia positioned the state positively. Negative framing was vanishingly rare and almost exclusively depicted Russia as the victim of hostile external actions.

Table 4.4: Framing of Russia-related posts by phase (%)

Phase	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
1	57.8%	31.9%	10.2%
2	75.1%	16.3%	8.5%
3	77.9%	12.4%	9.7%
4	79.8%	20.2%	0.0%
5	86.0%	10.6%	3.4%
6	93.1%	5.6%	1.3%
7	94.0%	5.6%	0.4%
8	91.0%	6.5%	2.5%

As the channel established itself, this editorial tilt became more pronounced. Positive framing leapt from 58 per cent in the early weeks to over 90 per cent in the post-launch phases. Neutral messaging was generally reserved for dry military updates or standard diplomatic schedules.

4.4.2 Sentiment for Ethiopian Stories

Similarly, local coverage was exceptionally favourable. As Table 4.5 demonstrates, reporting on Ethiopia maintained an average positive sentiment of 86 per cent. Negative coverage was restricted almost entirely to unavoidable realities: natural disasters, humanitarian crises, and traffic accidents.

Table 4.5: Sentiment of Ethiopia-focused posts by phase (%)

Phase	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
1	94.3%	4.6%	1.1%
2	85.7%	10.3%	4.0%
3	87.3%	9.4%	3.3%
4	82.9%	17.1%	0.0%

Table 4.5: Sentiment of Ethiopia-focused posts by phase (%)

Phase	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
5	87.2%	11.7%	1.0%
6	86.6%	12.3%	1.1%
7	90.9%	8.0%	1.1%
8	86.3%	11.2%	2.5%

The channel painted a picture of a nation on the rise. Much of the domestic reporting highlighted infrastructural triumphs, successful bilateral diplomacy, and cultural pride. This tightly aligns with the multipolar narratives discussed in Chapter Two. Yet, as the reaction data indicates, the audience did not blindly absorb this positivity; highly ambitious economic claims often drew visible scepticism from users.

4.5 Evolution of Content Strategies

4.5.1 Translated Content (“በእንግሊዘኛ ያንብቡ”)

The operational efficiency of the channel shifted radically with the introduction of translated, syndicated content. The marker “በእንግሊዘኛ ያንብቡ” (“read in English”) first

surfaced in Phase 2. By the close of the study period, 7,861 messages carried this tag, accounting for 38 per cent of all published material.

Table 4.6: Cumulative translated content by phase end

Phase	New in phase	Cumulative total	% of all messages
1	0	0	0%
2	750	750	18.5%
3	565	1,315	20.5%
4	103	1,418	20.7%
5	753	2,171	24.2%
6	1,684	3,990	32.1%
7	1,706	5,696	35.5%

Table 4.6: Cumulative translated content by phase end

Phase	New in phase	Cumulative total	% of all messages
8	2,165	7,861	37.8%

The sharpest spikes in translated output occurred during major global flashpoints, particularly the Iran–Israel conflict and the US–Venezuela crisis. By scraping and localising content from Sputnik Africa's English services, the Ethiopian channel was able to drastically increase its output without straining local production resources.

4.5.2 AI-Generated Imagery

Another major production shift was the normalisation of AI-assisted imagery. Labelled with the phrase "በሰው ሠራሽ አስተውሎት", these images were introduced cautiously in Phase 5 but quickly became a staple.

Table 4.7: Cumulative AI-labelled imagery by phase end

Phase	New in phase	Cumulative total
1–4	0	0

Table 4.7: Cumulative AI-labelled imagery by phase end

Phase	New in phase	Cumulative total
5	~11	~11
6	~174	~240
7	~135	~375
8	~252	~627

By Phase 8, over 600 explicitly labelled AI images had been published. They were deployed largely to illustrate historical features, abstract geopolitical concepts, and commemorative posts where authentic photography was either unavailable or lacked dramatic flair.

4.5.3 Original Podcasts and Interviews

Following a lull in the middle phases, original audio and video production became a cornerstone of the channel's late-stage strategy. Table 4.8 outlines the rollout of these distinct programming blocks.

Table 4.8: Original podcasts and interviews by phase

Phase	Episodes	Key series
1	~13	Miscellaneous interviews
2–5	0	—
6	~120	Sovereignty Sources, The Rising South
7	~116	+ Drum of Changes
8	~97	+ Continental Drift

Securing interviews with African heads of state, nuclear scientists, and prominent academics allowed Sputnik Ethiopia to anchor itself firmly within the local media ecosystem. While these long-form posts generally drew fewer raw reactions than breaking news, they were vital for building institutional credibility and networking with the Global South's intellectual and political elite.

4.6 Most-Reacted Posts and Emoji Patterns

4.6.1 Top Engaged Posts

Table 4.9 isolates the ten most heavily engaged posts. Analysing these outliers reveals the emotional triggers that most effectively mobilised the channel's audience.

Table 4.9: Ten most-reacted posts (May 2024 – February 2026)

ID	Date	Reactions	Topic	Observed reaction pattern
15761	19 Oct 25	74😳 31💔 12🤍 9😱 3🙏 = 129	Death of Grand Mufti Hajji Umar Idris	Grief and respect across religious lines
10862	17 Jun 25	49🤯 42👎 19🤍 9😁 8🩸 = 127	Trump demands Iran surrender unconditionally	Patterns consistent with ridicule, opposition, and anti-US sentiment
11181	24 Jun 25	67🩸 24🤍 12😁 11👍 = 115	Iran continues uranium enrichment	Celebration of Iranian defiance
11235	26 Jun	58👏 41😁	Khamenei declares Iran	Pro-Iran jubilation mixed

Table 4.9: Ten most-reacted posts (May 2024 – February 2026)

ID	Date	Reactions	Topic	Observed reaction pattern
	25	9 ❤️ = 110	victorious over Israel	with scepticism
8391	10 Apr 25	63 ❤️ 16 👍 10 😄 3 👏 = 92	Chinese woman sings Ethiopian hymn in Amharic	Cultural pride and bridge-building
11280	27 Jun 25	68 😭 10 🤣 6 😢 5 ❤️ 3 👍 = 92	Palestinian boy struggles after Israeli strike	Empathy and grief
11264	26 Jun 25	63 ❤️ 16 👍 5 👏 3 🔥 = 88	Ethiopian identity software raises $5m	National pride in tech achievement
14127	9 Sep 25	43 ❤️ 32 👍 6 🔥 = 81	PM Abiy announces new projects after GERD	Post-GERD optimism, predominantly supportive
15856	21 Oct	36 🤣 21 😄 11 ❤️ 5 😢 4 👍	92-year-old Paul Biya wins Cameroon 8th term	Pan-African political mockery

Table 4.9: Ten most-reacted posts (May 2024 – February 2026)

ID	Date	Reactions	Topic	Observed reaction pattern
	25	= 77		
19150	7 Jan 26	56 ❤️ 8 🙏 7 🥲 = 71	Putin's Orthodox Christmas message	Supportive reaction, consistent with affinity for Russian leadership

Cultural resonance and shared grief drove the highest genuine engagement. Conversely, Western geopolitical manoeuvring, such as US ultimatums to Iran, attracted massive interaction heavily skewed towards ridicule (👎, 😳, 😄). The data also points to a highly engaged sub-section of users willing to express public cynicism regarding pan-African politics, evidenced by the mockery of the Cameroon election results.

4.6.2 Emoji Distribution and the 😄 Phenomenon

The ❤️ emoji dominated the dataset, comprising 37 per cent of all reactions. However, the most fascinating behavioural shift was the weaponisation of the 😄 (grinning face) and 🤣 (rolling on the floor laughing) emojis to signal irony, disbelief, or political dissent.

Table 4.10: Share of 😄 and 🤣 emojis in total reactions (selected phases)

Phase	😄 share	🤣 share	Combined share
1	5.6%	—	5.6%
3	6.7%	—	6.7%
5	8.6%	1.8%	10.4%
6	8.5%	2.2%	10.7%
7	9.8%	1.8%	11.6%
8	12.0%	2.0%	14.0%

From a baseline of 5.6 per cent, these mocking reactions nearly tripled to 14 per cent by Phase 8. Qualitative observation confirmed that these emojis frequently clustered beneath lofty economic promises made by local officials, or Western demands issued to Global South nations. They formed a quiet but highly visible shadow commentary: an emoji-based language of scepticism operating beneath the official editorial line.

4.7 Key Events and Their Impact on Content

The channel operated on a highly reactive, event-driven axis. Table 4.11 cross-references major news events with the channel's subsequent operational response.

Table 4.11: Major events and their impact on Sputnik Ethiopia output

Event	Phase(s)	Impact
GERD inauguration	7	30+ posts; highest engagement; unified positive emotion; Russian diplomatic support highlighted
US-Venezuela crisis	8	Over 150 messages; intense anti-US reactions; African nations celebrated for defiance
Iran-Israel conflict	6	Roughly 240 Iran mentions, 195 Israel; pro-Iran framing; highest engagement on Trump's surrender demand
BRICS Rio and Kazan summits	6, 7	40+ posts each; Ethiopia's role as African voice within BRICS emphasised
Russia-Africa ministerial forum	7	Lavrov met 20+ African FMs; decolonisation

Table 4.11: Major events and their impact on Sputnik Ethiopia output

Event	Phase(s)	Impact
(Cairo)		declarations; extended blockquote coverage
Sputnik Ethiopia office opening	4-5	AU summit hosted; office opening celebrated; original content surge
Madagascar coup	7-8	62 messages; exclusive interviews with new president; framed as anti-French popular uprising
Putin-India state visit	8	Over 65 messages; BRICS economic roadmap; RT India launch; high engagement on car diplomacy
Ethiopia-Somalia-Somaliland row	8	Israel's recognition of Somaliland triggered AU, UN, Arab League condemnation; sovereignty framing
Grand Mufti's death	7	129 reactions – highest single-post engagement of study; appeared to transcend political

Table 4.11: Major events and their impact on Sputnik Ethiopia output

Event	Phase(s)	Impact
		divisions

Moments of political crisis reliably triggered shifts in editorial emphasis. During the Madagascar coup and the US-Venezuela diplomatic clash, Sputnik pivoted heavily towards narratives of decolonisation and resistance to Western hegemony. Conversely, events like the GERD inauguration allowed the channel to pivot into highly supportive, celebratory local coverage, firmly aligning Moscow's diplomatic stance with Ethiopian national pride.

4.8 Concluding Observations

By the conclusion of the 20-month study period, Sputnik Ethiopia had transformed from a nascent local broadcast experiment into a high-volume, geopolitically anchored digital outlet. The data from 20,828 messages reveals a channel that managed to double its daily output while simultaneously increasing its audience engagement rate from 58 per cent to 85 per cent. This growth was driven by a distinct thematic pivot towards regional relevance; Africa-centric content ultimately consumed nearly three-quarters of the feed, with domestic Ethiopian affairs making up over a fifth of all reporting.

Editorially, the channel maintained an ironclad positive sentiment towards both the Russian state (91 per cent) and Ethiopian domestic affairs (86 per cent). To sustain this rigorous output, Sputnik increasingly relied on syndicated translations from other services, which eventually comprised 38 per cent of the channel's total volume. The simultaneous

introduction of over 600 AI-assisted images and hundreds of original podcast episodes underscores a significant investment in format diversification.

Yet, the audience proved to be active participants rather than passive consumers. The evolution of a distinct, emoji-driven language of political scepticism, most notably the rise of the 😄 reaction to critique official claims, demonstrates a complex, interactive relationship between the broadcaster and its subscribers. Having mapped these empirical shifts in volume, framing, and audience behaviour, the following chapter will interrogate these findings through the theoretical frameworks of multipolarity and digital public diplomacy.

CHAPTER FIVE:
DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

Rather than restating the empirical findings presented in Chapter Four, this chapter interprets those results through the theoretical frameworks established in Chapter Two. The analysis explores what these digital patterns reveal about Russia's contemporary media footprint in Ethiopia, situating Sputnik Ethiopia within broader academic debates regarding soft power, public diplomacy, media imperialism, multipolarity, and postcolonial communication.

The discussion is organised chronologically around the study's five central research questions. It interrogates how Ethiopia and Africa are represented, assesses the structural and thematic continuities between contemporary digital operations and historical Soviet international broadcasting, and examines how Russia writes itself into the narrative of a multipolar world. Finally, the chapter evaluates how modern content-production practices and visible audience-engagement metrics disrupt and redefine traditional models of international broadcasting.

5.1 The Representation and Framing of Ethiopia (RQ1)

Sputnik Ethiopia consistently portrays both Ethiopia and the wider African continent in a highly favourable terms. As established in the previous chapter, **approximately 86 per cent of Ethiopia-focused posts carried positive sentiment**. This coverage predominantly emphasised infrastructure triumphs, diplomatic milestones, cultural heritage, and expanding technological capacity, often interwoven with themes of bilateral cooperation.

Crucially, the channel routinely frames Russia as an indispensable partner in Ethiopia's developmental journey. Reports detailing national achievements rarely isolate domestic success; instead, they embed Russian involvement within a broader narrative of mutual

progress. Russia emerges not as an opportunistic foreign actor, but as an ally whose geopolitical interests naturally align with Ethiopia's ambitions for sovereignty and international recognition.

This framing points to a highly calculated editorial strategy. By latching onto themes of development and progress, Sputnik taps directly into the prevailing current of Ethiopian national pride. The channel actively constructs a narrative ecosystem where Ethiopian agency is foregrounded, creating a sympathetic foundation upon which broader, Moscow-aligned geopolitical messaging can subsequently be introduced.

5.2 Continuities and Ruptures with Soviet Broadcasting (RQ2)

A primary objective of this research was to determine whether meaningful operational or thematic links exist between Cold War-era Soviet broadcasting and contemporary Sputnik digital networks. While the limited availability of archived Radio Moscow Amharic broadcasts limits direct, transcript-level comparison, the broader findings highlight striking continuities operating alongside profound structural ruptures.

The **most visible continuity lies in thematic emphasis**. Historical literature confirms that Soviet international broadcasting relentlessly championed African anti-colonial struggles, sovereignty, and state-led development. Radio Moscow sought to position the Soviet Union as the natural partner to newly independent African states. Today, Sputnik Ethiopia deploys a remarkably similar thematic playbook, prioritising narratives of African self-determination, resistance to Western pressure, and alternative pathways to economic development.

The **strategic imperative also remains largely intact**. In both eras, Moscow has utilised international broadcasting to circumvent Western media institutions and deliver alternative interpretations of world affairs directly to foreign publics.

However, the **ruptures between the two eras are fundamental**. The rigid, Marxist-Leninist internationalism of the Soviet era has vanished entirely. Instead of class struggle and proletarian revolution, Sputnik's contemporary vocabulary revolves around state sovereignty, multipolarity, and pragmatic strategic partnership, perfectly mirroring the ideological flexibility of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy. Technologically, the shift from analogue, unidirectional shortwave radio to an agile digital ecosystem characterised by multimedia integration and instant, visible audience feedback represents a complete paradigm shift in the mechanics of international communication.

5.3 Navigating Multipolarity and the Decolonial Question (RQ3)

Throughout the archive, Sputnik portrays Ethiopia and Africa as active, vital architects of an increasingly multipolar international system. Dispatches detailing BRICS expansion, South-South partnerships, and deepening Russia-Africa ties are routinely packaged within a grander narrative declaring the irreversible shift of global power dynamics.

This editorial line serves as a central pillar of contemporary Russian foreign-policy discourse, where **multipolarity is continuously pitched as the antidote to Western hegemony**. Within this framework, Ethiopia is never depicted as a passive recipient of superpower influence; rather, it is elevated as an actor of profound diplomatic, economic, and strategic weight.

Viewed through a decolonial lens, the channel's rhetoric, championing cultural dignity, African agency, and anti-colonial history, resonates strongly with postcolonial scholarship. Sputnik frequently amplifies African governments that publicly defy Western directives. Yet, the empirical data exposes **significant tensions within this supposedly emancipatory narrative**. The channel consistently directs its criticism toward Western institutions and governments, while Russian geopolitical manoeuvres are

shielded from scrutiny and framed favourably. Consequently, Sputnik Ethiopia promotes a highly selective vision of multipolarity: one that borrows the language of decoloniality to challenge Western informational dominance, whilst remaining securely tethered to Moscow's strategic interests.

5.4 Theoretical Assessments: Soft Power and Media Imperialism (RQ4)

To fully grasp the complexities of Sputnik Ethiopia's operations, its communication practices must be interrogated through the two frequently conflicting lenses of soft power and media imperialism.

Applying Nye's (2004) theory of **soft power**, the overwhelmingly positive framing of Ethiopia suggests a concerted effort to build influence through attraction. By persistently linking the Russian state to narratives of African development, mutual respect, and cultural pride, the channel attempts to generate perceived legitimacy rather than relying on political coercion. The audience reaction data, particularly the heavy volume of heart (💚) and applause (👏) emojis on posts celebrating bilateral cooperation, indicates that this strategy successfully courts positive engagement from a substantial segment of its readership.

However, the underlying mechanics of the channel invoke classical anxieties surrounding **media imperialism and dependency**. As Chapter Four demonstrated, by Phase 8, **approximately 37.8 per cent of all published messages were translated or adapted** from external Sputnik services. This structural reality means that critical decisions regarding story selection, initial framing, and source hierarchy are frequently made outside the Ethiopian media environment. This reliance on a centralised, transnational production hub echoes the unequal global information flows famously critiqued by Schiller (1976) and Boyd-Barrett (1977).

What emerges is a complex, hybrid model. Structurally, the channel exhibits clear symptoms of informational dependency. Editorially, however, it actively attempts to dismantle Western narrative dominance, functioning as a vehicle for counter-hegemonic communication. Sputnik Ethiopia defies neat categorisation, illustrating the friction of applying legacy media imperialism theories to state-affiliated digital networks in the twenty-first century.

5.5 Content Production and Audience Engagement (RQ5)

The operational data reveals a rapid evolution in both content delivery and audience interaction. Instead of relying solely on traditional text, Sputnik Ethiopia exploits Telegram's full suite of digital affordances, utilising a rich blend of syndicated translations, original audio podcasts, and AI-assisted visual media.

Crucially, unlike legacy broadcasting, Telegram leaves a visible, quantifiable trail of audience reception. Among the diverse reaction patterns catalogued in the study, **the increasing use of the grinning-face (😁) emoji was particularly revealing**. By the final operational phase, this symbol accounted for a highly notable share of total engagement. It appeared almost exclusively beneath sweeping economic forecasts or dubious political claims, functioning within this digital context as a potent expression of irony, disbelief, and political scepticism.

Different editorial themes consistently triggered distinct emotional responses. While religious events, humanitarian updates, and positive Russian portrayals routinely attracted waves of supportive reactions, domestic political claims often faced public mockery. These interactive patterns prove that the audience is far from a passive receptacle for state media. Users actively evaluate, mock, endorse, and interrogate the content. Even as Sputnik consistently advances its preferred narratives, the resulting digital environment remains highly dynamic, deeply participatory, and frequently contested.

5.6 Sputnik Ethiopia in the Context of Amharic-Language Broadcasting

The significance of these findings sharpens when contextualised against the wider ecosystem of Amharic-language international broadcasters, such as the VOA, BBC, and Deutsche Welle.

Sputnik's editorial identity is defined by its near-exclusive focus on state sovereignty, infrastructure development, and diplomatic synergy. It actively champions opportunities and national achievements while purposefully sidelining institutional criticism or domestic political contestation. This stands in stark contrast to Western international broadcasters operating in the region, which historically dedicate substantial airtime to issues of democratic governance, electoral transparency, and human rights.

Moreover, the establishment of a permanent, physical bureau and studio in Addis Ababa in February 2025 separates Sputnik from competitors who produce a vast majority of their Amharic programming offshore. This localised infrastructure empowers the channel to generate highly targeted, culturally resonant multimedia content, allowing it to carve out a distinct ideological and operational niche within a fiercely competitive media market.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This final chapter draws together the threads of the preceding analysis, reflecting on what the evolution of Sputnik Ethiopia reveals about the broader mechanics of international broadcasting and digital public diplomacy. Moving beyond a mere recapitulation of the data, it synthesises the primary empirical conclusions, outlines the study's distinct contributions to academic knowledge, and acknowledges the methodological constraints that shaped the research. Finally, it offers targeted recommendations for policymakers, media practitioners, and future scholars tasked with navigating the complexities of state-sponsored digital communication.

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

The longitudinal mapping of 20,828 Telegram messages published between May 2024 and February 2026 demonstrates Sputnik Ethiopia’s rapid evolution. What began as a relatively modest local broadcast experiment expanded into a highly active digital hub, defined by surging content volume and dynamic audience engagement. As the operational phases progressed, the channel significantly expanded its presense within the Ethiopian digital sphere.

A striking editorial hierarchy emerged from the dataset. Continental African affairs anchored the channel's output, whilst coverage dedicated strictly to Ethiopia became increasingly prominent over time. Across all operational phases, the feed relentlessly prioritised narratives of infrastructural triumph, diplomatic agility, national sovereignty, and international cooperation. Crucially, the channel locked Ethiopia into a distinctly positive frame, portraying the nation as a rising power commanding international relevance.

Alongside this domestic positivity, the editorial line consistently positioned Moscow as an indispensable, benevolent partner in the Global South's development. In stark contrast, Western governments and international institutions were routinely framed within adversarial or conflict-driven narratives. Behind the scenes, the channel's production mechanics also matured. The reliance on syndicated, translated material from the broader Sputnik network grew substantially, AI-labelled imagery transitioned from a novelty to a daily visual staple, and locally anchored original audio programming successfully broadened the platform's media portfolio.

6.2 Synthesis of the Research Questions

When evaluated collectively, the answers to the study's five research questions sketch a sophisticated, hybrid model of modern state broadcasting. Regarding representation and multipolarity (RQ1 & RQ3), Sputnik Ethiopia discursively constructs African states not as historical victims or passive subjects of external intervention, but as sovereign architects of a shifting global order. Through relentless coverage of BRICS summits, regional diplomacy, and independent economic development, the channel frames Ethiopia as a primary beneficiary of multipolarity. Yet, whilst this rhetoric publicly champions decolonial independence, it operates entirely within Moscow's strategic parameters, carefully positioning Russia as the natural, non-coercive alternative to Western dominance.

Looking at historical continuity (RQ2), distinct echoes of Soviet-era Radio Moscow Amharic survive. Both historical and contemporary projects share a fierce commitment to anti-colonial narratives, national sovereignty, and the promotion of Russian goodwill. The ruptures, however, are equally profound. The rigid Marxist-Leninist vocabulary of the Cold War has been entirely displaced by a pragmatic discourse of strategic partnership. Furthermore, the migration from unidirectional shortwave radio to an interactive, immediate digital platform has irrevocably altered the power dynamic between the broadcaster and its audience.

Theoretical attempts to classify the channel (RQ4) demonstrate that no single framework suffices. Soft-power theory perfectly explains Sputnik's reliance on attraction-based narratives, leaning on cultural exchange and mutual respect to build credibility. Conversely, the operational reality of the channel, where nearly 40 per cent of its output relies on translated content dictated by a centralised global network, echoes the structural anxieties of classical media imperialism and dependency theories. The result is a dual-layered communication model: localised cultural attraction layered over centralised editorial control.

Finally, the interplay of evolution and engagement (RQ5) highlights the channel's operational agility. Sputnik Ethiopia rapidly diversified its content strategy to exploit Telegram's unique affordances. Critically, the observable audience reaction data proved that high digital engagement does not automatically equate to ideological persuasion. The increasing deployment of mocking, sceptical, or ironic emojis in response to official claims confirms that audiences actively negotiate, and frequently reject, state-sponsored narratives in real time.

6.3 Contributions to Knowledge

This research makes several distinct contributions to the fields of international communication and digital public diplomacy. Empirically, it provides one of the first longitudinal analysis of Sputnik Ethiopia's foundational operational phases. By processing a massive dataset of over 20,000 messages, the study delivers a granular account of how Russian state media adapts its operational tactics to penetrate an African digital ecosystem.

Theoretically, the findings disrupt the binary application of traditional communication models. By proving that a single platform can simultaneously exhibit the traits of soft power attraction, counter-hegemonic resistance, and transnational media dependency, the research underscores the urgent need for multi-theoretical approaches when evaluating modern, state-backed digital networks. Methodologically, the study successfully

integrates chunk-based longitudinal content analysis with a nuanced interpretation of platform-specific digital engagement, offering a novel framework for decoding emoji semiotics as a form of audience negotiation.

6.4 Limitations

Despite its contributions, the scope of the study necessitates several acknowledgements. Archival constraints fundamentally limited the historical comparative aspect of the research; because direct access to primary audio recordings of Soviet Amharic broadcasts was unavailable, the historical baseline relied predominantly on secondary literature.

Furthermore, the empirical data collection was platform-exclusive. By focusing entirely on Telegram, the study cannot account for how Sputnik Ethiopia tailors its communication strategies, or how audiences behave, on its official website, X, Facebook, or YouTube channels. There is also an inherent limitation in interpreting digital reactions. Whilst emoji distributions provide highly visible metrics of engagement, they cannot definitively expose internal user intent. Without corroborating ethnographic fieldwork or audience surveys, translating a symbol into an absolute ideological stance remains inherently subjective. Finally, as a single-researcher project, despite rigorous pilot testing and systematic documentation, the potential for subjective bias during the manual coding process cannot be entirely eliminated.

6.5 Recommendations

6.5.1 For Ethiopian Media Regulators and Policy Makers

Contemporary policy discussions surrounding foreign media influence must urgently look beyond traditional terrestrial broadcasting frameworks. Telegram now operates as a primary, largely unregulated space for political communication and narrative distribution in Ethiopia. Policymakers should champion digital media literacy initiatives that move beyond the simplistic identification of "fake news". Audiences require the tools to

critically evaluate syndicated geopolitical content, spot AI-assisted synthetic media, and decode highly emotional editorial framing. Ultimately, the greatest defence against external informational dominance is a resilient domestic media landscape; protecting Ethiopia's information environment depends heavily on fostering sustainable, locally produced, multilingual journalism.

6.5.2 For Russian International Media

For media practitioners operating within transnational networks, these findings suggest that high volumes of digital interaction should not be misread as uniform ideological alignment. The visible undercurrent of sceptical and ironic reaction patterns confirms that Ethiopian audiences are highly engaged and actively contest external narratives. To secure long-term credibility, international broadcasters must move away from a heavy reliance on centrally produced, translated content that frequently lacks local nuance, investing instead in authentic, locally grounded original journalism.

6.5.3 For Future Research

This thesis highlights several promising avenues for future scholarship. Firstly, the semiotics of emoji use in political communication warrants deep investigation; future researchers should explore how digital reactions function as expressions of community identity, satire, or political dissent within African digital cultures. Secondly, comparative analyses across multiple Amharic-language international broadcasters such as the DW, VOA, BBC, and Sputnik, would yield vital insights into how competing geopolitical alignments influence local narrative framing. Finally, as the deployment of AI-generated visual media transitions from a novelty to standard editorial practice, urgent research is required to interrogate its long-term impact on journalistic authenticity, public trust, and persuasion within the Global South.

6.6 Concluding Remarks

This study traced the communicative trajectory from the shortwave broadcasts of Cold War-era Radio Moscow Amharic to the rapid digital expansion of Sputnik Ethiopia. By combining historical contextualisation with an exhaustive longitudinal analysis of Telegram metadata, the research illuminated how Russian international media has recalibrated its tactics to survive in a profoundly altered technological and political landscape.

While the medium has shifted entirely, the core utility of state-sponsored international broadcasting remains intact: deploying communication to shape foreign perceptions and secure geopolitical advantage. However, the architecture of the modern digital public square has demolished the unidirectional broadcasting models of the twentieth century. Today, audiences are no longer passive recipients of international broadcasting. They actively engage with, reinterpret, and sometimes challenge the meanings that state media organisations seek to construct.

Sputnik Ethiopia thus occupies a highly volatile position within the global information ecosystem. It operates simultaneously as an instrument of soft-power projection, a centralised node in a transnational news network, and a digital battleground heavily shaped by local cultural resistance and active audience interpretation. As digital platforms continue to accelerate and democratise the flow of global information, decoding these interactive, hybrid media environments transcends academic curiosity. It is a vital prerequisite for understanding the future mechanics of global geopolitical power.

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APPENDIX A: CONDENSED CODING SCHEME

The full coding framework and operational definitions used for the chunk-level analysis are detailed in Chapter 3. A condensed reference of the primary variables is provided below.

Table A.1: Summary of coding variables

Category	Variable	Values / Description
Structural	Total messages	Count
	Messages with text	Count; excludes media-only or empty-caption posts
	Messages with reactions	Frequency count and percentage
	Messages without reactions	Frequency count and percentage
	Blockquotes	Count; messages containing quoted official statements or expert commentary
	Reply messages	Count; threaded responses
	Video files	Count
	Photo files	Count
	Audio podcasts	Count

Table A.1: Summary of coding variables

Category	Variable	Values / Description
Geographic/Thematic	Africa (individual countries)	Country names (Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Africa, etc.)
	Africa (continental/general)	References to "Africa", AfCFTA, AU, etc.
	Russia	Any mention of Russia, Russian officials, military activity, or foreign policy
	Europe (excl. Russia)	Ukraine, France, UK, Germany, etc.
	Asia	China, India, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, etc.
	Americas	United States, Cuba, Venezuela, Brazil, etc.
	Global/Regional Bodies	UN, AU, EU, BRICS, NATO, ICC, IGAD, etc.
Framing (Russia posts)	Positive	Russia as active, cooperative, strong, diplomatic success
	Neutral	Informational reporting without explicit praise or blame

Table A.1: Summary of coding variables

Category	Variable	Values / Description
	Negative	Russia portrayed as under attack, criticised, constrained, or experiencing setbacks
Sentiment (Africa/Ethiopia posts)	Positive	Development, success, cooperation, pride, sovereignty
	Neutral	Factual reporting without evaluative language
	Negative	Conflict, crisis, criticism, natural disasters
Content Indicators	Translated content	Presence of "በእንግሊዘኛ ያንብቡ" + link
	AI-generated imagery	Presence of "በሰው ሠራሽ አስተውሎት" or variant
	Original podcasts	Episodes not republished from other Sputnik services
	Original interviews	Standalone interview transcripts produced by Sputnik Ethiopia
Source Attribution	Named officials	Russian, African, Western, other (names recorded)

Table A.1: Summary of coding variables

Category	Variable	Values / Description
	Anonymous sources	Presence of "local media reported", "sources said", "social media", etc.
	Named media/experts	Sputnik Africa, Reuters, AFP, ENA, Fana, Jeffrey Sachs, etc.
Engagement	Total reactions	Sum of all emoji counts
	Individual emoji counts	💔, 😄, 👏, 👍, 👎, 🔥, 😳, 🙏, 🤣, 💀, etc.