

ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND SECURITY STUDIES



**IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON SOCIAL COHESION:
DISINFORMATION & HATE SPEECH DURING THE
ETHIOPIAN CIVIL WAR (2020-2022)**

BY
NETSANET FELEKE

JUNE 2024

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**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY,
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Acronyms and Abbreviations

A.A.: Addis Ababa

AAU: Addis Ababa University

ACCORD: The African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes

AFP: Agence France Presse (French international news agency)

ASF: Amhara Special Force

BBC: British Broadcast Corporation

CNN: Cable News Network

CFR: Council on Foreign Affairs

EBC: Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation

EDF: Eritrean Defence Forces

EHRC: Ethiopian Human Rights Commission

EIP: European Institute of Peace

EIRC: Ethiopian Inter-Religious Council

EMA: Ethiopia Media Authority

ENDC: Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission

ENDF: Ethiopian National Defence Forces

EPA: Ethiopian Press Agency

EPRDF: Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front

FDRE: Federal Democracy Republic of Ethiopia

HoPR: House of Peoples' Representatives

ICCPR: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

JIT: Joint Investigation Team

KII: Key Informant Interview

MoP: Ethiopian Ministry of Peace

NEBE: National Electoral Board of Ethiopia

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OHCHR: Office of the United Nation High Commissioner for Human Rights

PR: Public Relations

SM: Social Media

TPLF: Tigray People's Liberation Front

TDF: Tigray Defence Force

UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

UN OCHA: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

US: United States of America

USAID: US Agency for International Development

VOA: Voice of America

WHO: World Health Organization

Abstract

The Ethiopian civil war 2020-2022 underscores the profound impact of social media on social cohesion, with platforms like Facebook and Twitter significantly shaping narratives and public discourse. This study delves into how the spread of disinformation and hate speech on social media has intensified ethnic tensions and eroded trust within communities. By conducting a comprehensive literature review and employing qualitative methods such as content analysis and stakeholder interviews, the research investigates the role of these platforms in expanding divisions and escalating conflict. It identifies predominant narratives that fuel polarization and highlights the critical need for robust content moderation and regulatory frameworks. The study emphasizes the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration, involving policymakers, social media companies, civil society, and international organizations, to address the adverse effects of social media. Effective management of social media's influence in contemporary conflicts requires balancing freedom of expression with the prevention of harmful content. The findings offer valuable insights into strategies for mitigating the negative impact of social media, promoting peace, and fostering long-term stability in Ethiopia. By understanding and managing the dual-edged nature of social media, stakeholders can better support efforts to maintain social cohesion and rebuild trust in conflict-affected regions.

Keywords: Social media, Hate speech, Disinformation, Social Cohesion

CHAPTER ONE

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the study

The term "social media" has a comprehensive scope. According to Britannica, it covers online platforms and Internet-based communication techniques, like social networking sites and micro-blogging services. These platforms empower users to share information, ideas, personal messages, and various content forms, including videos (Britannica, 2024). Manning (2014) also notes that social media platforms have revolutionized the dynamics of how individuals connect, disseminate information, and participate in contemporary societal matters.

The global popularity of social media is expanding alongside the digital population. Online platforms have become integral day-to-day life, transforming global interpersonal interactions and information access (Teselios, 2018). Initially youth-centric, (Reid & Weigle, 2014) these platforms now accommodate to users of all ages, facilitating activities reaching from business, socializing, politics, and everyday communication (James, 2023).

In July 2023, the global count of internet users reached 5.19 billion, equivalent to 64.6 per-cent of the world's population. Out of this, 4.88 billion people, or 59.9 per-cent of the global population, actively engaged with social media (Statista, 2003). According to the Ethiopian Telecom 2023 Performance report, Ethiopia had approximately 33.9 million people data and internet users. By Early 2024, Facebook emerged as the leading social media platform in Ethiopia, boasting nearly 7.1 million users. Twitter (X) users in Ethiopia is 3.1 million (Datareportal, 2024).

Ethiopia, like many countries, experiences both positive and negative consequences due to the increasing use of social media (Mulugeta, 2019). Ethiopia is a diverse nation with multiple ethnic groups, languages, and cultural identities (Ethiopian Culture & Tourism Minister, 2023). While this diversity is a source of strength, (The Ethiopian Herald, 11 Dec. 2021) it can also be a potential source of tension and conflict (Abebaw, 2013).

In the context of global social and economic transformations driven by globalization, social cohesion has emerged as a strategic means to combat exclusion and poverty. Social cohesion fosters social solidarity, stability, integration, identity, and unity of society, contributing to economic development and welfare (OECD, 2011; World Bank, 2023).

However, recent times have witnessed numerous threats to building a strong and cohesive society. Social media emerges as a prominent threat; one significant negative impact of social media in Ethiopia is the rapid spread of disinformation and fake news (Temesgen, 2020&Asrat S., et al., 2023). False or misleading information can create division and mistrust within the country, eroding the sense of unity and trust necessary for social cohesion. In particular, politically motivated false narratives can contribute to ethnic and political tensions, undermining national unity. (Ibid)

Online hate speeches also pose a significant challenge to social cohesion in Ethiopia (Tadesse, 2018). These negative behaviours can create hostile online environments, discouraging open communication and fostering fear and mistrust among users. This can lead individuals to withdraw from online and offline social interactions, contributing to social fragmentation. (Ibid)

Furthermore, social media in Ethiopia has contributed to the creation of echo chambers and filter bubbles, where users are exposed primarily to content that aligns with their existing beliefs and ethnic affiliations (Gebremariam, 2019). This selective exposure can intensify existing ethnic and political divides, limiting dialogue and understanding among different social groups.

To address these challenges and promote peaceful relations, it is crucial to comprehensively study the negative impacts of social media on Ethiopian society. This research seeks to shed light on the influence of social media disinformation & hate speech on social cohesion during Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) and propose strategies to mitigate its detrimental effects, ultimately contributing to a more harmonious society.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Social media, a powerful modern network connecting people globally through the internet, can be both a force for good and a source of harm. It is often referred to as a 'double-edged sword.' (Anne & Judith, 2014)

On the positive side, it facilitates global communication, sharing information, and business expansion, enhancing social and economic interactions (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

On the contrary, the "Dark Side" of social media also arises from the fact that it often lacks adherence to journalistic ethics, editorial procedures, and accountability (Cecilia & Singer, 2007). Moreover, it grants virtually anyone the ability to create and disseminate information from any location. Unlike traditional media, social media is not as carefully filtered, which means it can allow the spread of fake, hateful, and humiliating content without demanding fact-checking or critical analysis (Pamela, 2023). When society accepts such content as truth, the potential damage is intensified.

In Ethiopia, those involved in producing and disseminating content on social media include journalists, political elites, activists, artists, religious leaders, and individuals from various professions, both within the country and abroad

In Ethiopia, there are those who use social media for positive purposes, while, on the contrary, Data indicates that social media has been used to spread disinformation & hate speech contributing to conflicts and unrest (ACCORD, 2021). For instance, the protests against the Addis Ababa master plan in the Oromia region were largely driven by social media (The Guardian, 11 Dec. 2015). Social media also played a significant role in the conflict between the EFDR government and TPLF (VOA, 17 Oct. 2021). Similarly, in the Amhara region, issues arose during the reorganization of regional and federal security institutions, and although there were underlying reasons for these problems, the disinformation spread through social media significantly contributed to the region becoming more of a conflict zone (AFP, 16 Oct. 2023).

Most research on the negative side of social media focuses on disinformation, and hate speech trends, encourage violence and also to some extent, the impact on users. For example Besufkad in his research titled; "An assessment of users' response to fake

news on social media: The case of popular bloggers and social media influencers” (2021), investigates the impact of media technology on news production and consumption in Ethiopia, with a focus on the influence of fake news on social media users. The study aims to identify common fake news topics, analyse user responses, assess the role of bloggers and social media influencers in disseminating fake news, and examine how fake news affects trust in social media. The research shows that fake news is prevalent in Ethiopia, particularly concerning politics and religion. Ethnic-based and reputation-damaging fake news also have significant impacts. The spread of fake news is influenced by political tensions, low digital literacy, and the desire to promote specific ideas or discredit others.

Following the 2018 political reform in Ethiopia, Mulukenn Asegidew Chekol and colleagues conducted a study titled "Social media hate speech in the wake of Ethiopian political reform: analysis of hate speech prevalence, severity, and natures". The study looks at hate speech on social media in Ethiopia after the 2018 political reform. Before, the government controlled social media tightly, but after the reform; people felt they could express themselves more. However, this also led to more hate speech, especially about politics, ethnicity, and religion. Researchers analysed comments from ethnic-based TV channels' Facebook and YouTube pages. They found a lot of hate speech, mostly offensive and sometimes encouraging violence or resembling genocide. Triggers for hate speech include disagreements about the past, connections between ethnicity and religion, and cultural differences. Online tensions reflect offline ethnic conflicts during the reform, making hate speech common and hurting Ethiopian social media.

Other study done by Mulugeta (2019) on the topic of “Mapping online hate speech among Ethiopians (2018): the case of Facebook, twitter and YouTube”. His research primarily aims to uncover the extent of online hate speech, categorize the types and themes of hate speech, and examine how social media platforms contribute to its dissemination. Additionally, it explores the impact of hate speech on society and aims to raise awareness of the issue to encourage intervention and mitigation efforts by the government and society.

In the research article titled "Ethnic-based Online Hate Speech in Ethiopia: Its Typology and Context" by Tadesse and Abebaw (May 2023), the authors delve into the escalating issue of hate speech in Ethiopia, particularly on online platforms. They emphasize the significant impact of language that devalues others, which can lead to severe consequences, including the potential for conflicts, the creation of adversaries, and even the risk of genocide. The study's findings unveil four primary types of hate speech and five central contexts where these expressions are prevalent.

According to various studies, the dissemination of disinformation and hate speech on social media has intensified conflicts in Ethiopia and presented significant challenges for society. Of particular concern is the escalating prevalence of disinformation and hate speech, which not only intensifies conflicts but also undermines social cohesion.

The motivation behind this research due to the urgent need to address the growing challenges associated with social media in Ethiopia. The primary objective of this study is to investigate whether the proliferation of disinformation and hate speech on social media, particularly during periods of conflict, not only ignite conflicts but also tensions social interactions within society.

In particular, during the recent Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) in Tigray, located in the northern part of the country, little research has been conducted on the impact of disinformation and hate speech disseminated through social media platforms on social cohesion in Ethiopian society. Additionally, most recent studies on the Ethiopian civil war have focused primarily on the Tigray side. My research aims to address the issue from both perspectives.

Therefore, this study aims to analyse the dissemination of disinformation and hate speech on social media within the context of the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022), to underscore the adverse effects of divisive message, and to offer valuable perspectives for fostering constructive dialogue and reconciliation among different communities.

1.3. Objectives of the study

1.3.1. General objectives

The general objective of the study is to examine how social media spreads disinformation, and facilitates hate speech during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022), with the aim of to understand the impact of these phenomena on social cohesion.

1.3.2. Specific objectives

The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

- Analyse the content of disinformation and hate speech on social media platforms during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022).
- Examine how social media plays a role in spreading disinformation and hate speech in Ethiopia and the resulting effects on social cohesion.
- Assess the implications of social media-mediated narratives for social cohesion and peace-building efforts in Ethiopia.

1.4. Research Questions

This study is conducted to answer the following research questions:

- What are the predominant narratives propagated through social media platforms during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022)?
- How do social media contribute to the dissemination of disinformation and hate speech in the Ethiopian context, and what are the consequences for social cohesion?
- What are the implications of social media-driven disinformation and hate speech for social cohesion and peace-building in Ethiopia?

1.5. Scope of the Study

The study attempted to explore the influence of social media platforms, specifically Twitter and Facebook, on social cohesion during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022).

Because Facebook has a significant user base in Ethiopia, and during the war, there was a high level of campaign activity on both Twitter and Facebook. These social media platforms serve as critical channels for disseminating information, shaping public discourse, and influencing perceptions and attitudes related to the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022), thereby impacting social cohesion in Ethiopian society.

It's important to acknowledge the limitation of the data collection and analysis time frame, which was confined to the period from November 2020 to November 2022. This restricted time frame may have implications for the comprehensiveness and depth of the findings, particularly in capturing long-term trends or changes beyond this period.

The study involves research, reporting and in-depth interviews with key Ethiopian institutions, including the Ministry of Peace (MoP), the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), the Ethiopian Inter-Religious Council (EIRC), the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC), and the Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA).

1.6. Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it addresses the urgent need to understand the growing challenges posed by social media in Ethiopia, particularly during conflicts. By analysing the dissemination of disinformation and hate speech during the 2020-2022 Ethiopian civil war; this research provides insights into how these harmful narratives impact social cohesion. It also offers valuable perspectives for contributing to peace-building efforts in Ethiopia.

Additionally, this research holds significance for academic studies, data analysis, situational comprehension, further inquiries, policy formulation, and other relevant purposes.

1.7. Limitation of the study

During the data collection phase, certain challenges impacted the comprehensiveness of the data. Many posts containing hate speech were deleted by the users who originally posted them, leading to a significant loss of potential data. Social media platforms also removed numerous posts reported as hate speech in their efforts to enforce community standards, further reducing the available content for analysis.

Additionally, some users accidentally deleted posts or changed their privacy settings before the study began in 2022, limiting the researchers' ability to capture a complete picture of hate speech activity during the targeted period. The study employed alternative methods to address these issues and recover some of the lost content. Researchers identified instances where original hate speech content had been re-tweeted or shared by other users, providing an indirect way to access the study employed alternative methods to address these issues and recover some of the lost content of the deleted content. They also transcribed hate speech content when possible, ensuring at least a textual record was maintained. Furthermore, the researcher conducted extensive web searches to find reports, studies, and other documentation that referenced disinformation and hate speech during the specified period, including academic studies, news articles, and public reports. Despite these efforts, the process was time-consuming and labour-intensive, limiting the scope of the research and potentially impacting its conclusions.

1.8. Organization of the Study

This research is divided into five chapters. Chapter one provides an introduction to the research study. It includes the background of the study, statement of the problem, objectives, research questions, scope, significance, limitations, and organizational structure of the thesis. The second chapter deals with the review of related literature in the area of Social media and Social cohesion which are relevant to the researcher's study. This section explores theoretical and conceptual frameworks relating to the negative impact of social media on social cohesion. Chapter three presents the research methods used in detail. It outlines the methodologies employed to gather and analyse data for the study. The fourth and most significant chapter examines the data presentation and analysis of the research, as well as the study's findings. Finally, chapter five offers the conclusion of the research study.

CHAPTER TWO

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1. Definition and Concept of Social Media

Social media is a term used to describe online platforms and technologies that enable users to create, share, and exchange content in virtual communities and networks Manning, J. (2014). It has become an integral part of modern communication, shaping how individuals interact, share information, and engage with each other online (Teselios, & Savu (2018). The concept of SM encompasses various websites and applications that facilitate user-generated content, including text, images, videos, and audio (Britannica, 2024).

SM is a multifaceted and dynamic digital ecosystem that has revolutionized communication, information sharing, and interaction among users worldwide. According to Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010), SM can be defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content."

The concept of social media encompasses a wide range of online platforms and technologies that enable users to create, share, and exchange content in virtual communities and networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). These platforms facilitate various forms of communication, including text-based messages, photos, videos, and live streams, fostering engagement and interaction among users.

SM platforms offer diverse features and functionalities tailored to different types of interactions and content sharing. For example, Facebook, founded by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004, enables users to create personal profiles, connect with friends and family, share updates, photos, and videos, and participate in group discussions and events (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

Twitter, established in 2006, focuses on real-time communication through short-form messages known as tweets, allowing users to share thoughts, opinions, and news updates with their followers (Java & Tseng, 2007). Instagram, launched in 2010,

emphasizes visual content, enabling users to share photos, videos, and stories with their followers, fostering creativity and self-expression (Dhir & Tsai, 2017).

LinkedIn, founded in 2003, serves as a professional networking platform designed for career development, networking, and business-related interactions (Wang & Hou, 2017). It allows users to create professional profiles, connect with colleagues and industry professionals, and discover job opportunities and business prospects.

The interactive nature of social media fosters engagement, collaboration, and community building among users. It enables real-time communication, instant feedback, and rapid dissemination of information, making it a powerful tool for connecting individuals and communities across geographical boundaries and cultural divides (Alhabash & Ma, 2017).

However, social media also presents challenges and concerns, including issues related to privacy, cyber-security, misinformation, and online harassment (Tufekci, 2014). The viral nature of content dissemination on SM can lead to the rapid spread of rumours, disinformation, and hate speech, posing threats to societal cohesion and digital well-being (Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

2.1.1. The role of social media

The role of social media in contemporary society is multifaceted, influencing various aspects of communication, information dissemination, and social interaction. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have transformed the way people connect, share information, and engage with content online (González & Lelkes, 2022). Understanding the depth of this influence requires a comprehensive examination of its various dimensions.

SM platforms serve as powerful tools for communication and connectivity, enabling individuals to interact with others regardless of geographical barriers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Through features such as instant messaging, comments, and sharing, users can engage in real-time conversations, exchange ideas, and build communities based on shared interests or affiliations.

According to Castells, (2009) SM has democratized the dissemination of information, allowing users to share news, opinions, and multimedia content with global audiences instantaneously. This democratization has empowered individuals and grassroots movements to amplify their voices, raise awareness about social issues, and challenge traditional media narratives.

SM platforms play a pivotal role in shaping public discourse and influencing public opinion on a wide range of topics, including politics, culture, and current events. The viral nature of social media content enables information to spread rapidly and reach diverse audiences, often bypassing traditional gatekeepers such as news organizations (Bakshy et al., 2015).

The other role of social media is formation of online communities (boyd & Ellison, 2007); it facilitates the formation of online communities based on shared interests, identities, or affiliations. These communities provide platforms for individuals to connect, collaborate, and mobilize around common causes, whether they are social, political, or cultural in nature

Social media has also transformed the landscape of commerce and business, providing opportunities for advertising, marketing, and e-commerce. Businesses leverage social media platforms to reach target audiences, engage with customers, and promote products and services (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

(Tufekci, 2014) Despite its many benefits, social media also presents significant challenges and concerns. These include issues related to privacy, data security, online harassment, misinformation, and the spread of hate speech and extremist ideologies

2.1.2. Social media influence during conflict

SM exerts a profound influence during conflicts, reshaping the landscape of communication, mobilization, and information dissemination. One significant aspect is its role in facilitating the rapid spread of information and mobilizing actors. Through platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and others, users can swiftly disseminate news, images, and videos, bypassing traditional media channels and reaching global audiences. This enables the rapid mobilization of supporters, activists, and combatants,

facilitating the organization of protests, demonstrations, and even armed movements (Howard & Hussain, 2013).

Furthermore, SM platforms serve as amplifiers of voices for marginalized or oppressed groups. (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) Through hashtags (#), viral campaigns, and user-generated content, individuals can draw attention to human rights abuses, atrocities, and injustices perpetrated during conflicts. This amplification of voices can exert pressure on governments, international organizations, and the global community to intervene and address humanitarian crises.

However, the impact of SM during conflicts is not solely positive. Conflicting parties often exploit these platforms to disseminate propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation aimed at manipulating public opinion and delegitimizing opponents. False narratives, fabricated images, and misleading videos can distort perceptions of reality, fuelling hatred, fear, and polarization among communities. This information warfare complicates efforts to achieve peace, reconciliation, and conflict resolution (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Moreover, SM plays a crucial role in facilitating humanitarian response during conflicts. (Meier, 2015) It enables real-time communication, coordination, and information sharing among responders, facilitating the delivery of aid, medical assistance, and emergency services to affected populations. SM also empowers affected communities to report emergencies, request assistance, and connect with humanitarian actors directly.

Despite its potential benefits, social media's influence during conflicts also poses significant challenges and risks. The viral spread of hate speech, incitement to violence, and extremist ideologies can intensify tensions, escalate violence, and perpetuate cycles of conflict. Moreover, the proliferation of fake news, conspiracy theories, and doctored images can undermine trust in institutions, sow confusion, and hinder efforts towards peace-building and reconciliation (Kumar, 2018).

2.2. Disinformation

2.2.1. Definition

Disinformation broadly refers to the deliberate spread of false or misleading information with the intention to deceive, manipulate, or influence public opinion (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). It represents a strategic effort to distort reality, shape narratives, and advance specific agendas, often at the expense of truth and accuracy. Disinformation can take various forms, including fabricated news stories, manipulated images or videos, deceptive SM posts, and malicious rumours.

At its core, disinformation involves the intentional dissemination of misleading content across various media platforms, exploiting vulnerabilities in the information ecosystem to achieve desired outcomes. Unlike misinformation, which may involve the unintentional sharing of inaccurate information, disinformation involves a calculated effort to sow confusion, create discord, or undermine trust in institutions and sources of authority. (Ibid)

Based on Ethiopian Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation (2020), Disinformation means speech that is false, is disseminated by a person who knew or should reasonably have known the falsity of the information and is highly likely to cause a public disturbance, riot, violence or conflict.

According to Wardle & Derakhshan, (2017), the concept of disinformation is deeply intertwined with broader issues of information warfare, propaganda, and psychological manipulation. State actors, political organizations, special interest groups frequently employ it, and malicious actors seeking to shape public perceptions, influence behaviour, or undermine adversaries. Disinformation campaigns often target critical issues such as politics, public health, national security, and social issues, leveraging emotional appeal, sensationalism, and sensationalism to maximize impact.

The proliferation of digital technologies and social media platforms has facilitated the rapid dissemination of disinformation, enabling its widespread dissemination to global audiences with unprecedented speed and reach. The viral nature of online communication channels, coupled with the prevalence of echo chambers and filter

bubbles, amplifies the impact of disinformation, making it increasingly challenging to discern fact from fiction. (Ibid)

2.2.2. Social media disinformation

One of the key characteristics of social media disinformation is its ability to rapidly reach large audiences and spread virally across different platforms. The interconnected nature of social media networks enables misinformation to circulate widely, often without proper verification or fact-checking mechanisms in place. This phenomenon is intensified by the algorithmic design of many social media platforms, which prioritize engagement and amplification of content based on user interactions rather than the accuracy or reliability of the information (Bradshaw & Howard2019).

According to Wardle & Derakhshan, (2017) Social media disinformation encompasses a variety of deceptive tactics aimed at influencing public opinion and behaviour. The one tactic is false news stories; it represents one prominent form of disinformation, where entirely fabricated narratives are created and disseminated to deceive readers and manipulate public sentiment on specific issues or events.

The other tactic is manipulated images and videos; it constitutes another prevalent form of social media disinformation. Through digital alteration or manipulation, images and videos can be distorted to misrepresent events, manipulate perceptions, or create false impressions. These manipulated media elements are often used to incite violence, sow discord, or undermine trust in institutions, further exacerbating the spread of misinformation.

Additionally, social media platforms are fertile ground for the propagation of misleading narratives and conspiracy theories. Disinformation campaigns frequently promote narratives that exploit existing fears, prejudices, or grievances within society to advance specific agendas or ideologies. These misleading narratives can shape public perception and influence behaviour, contributing to polarization and distrust within communities

Furthermore, coordinated disinformation campaigns represent a sophisticated and organized effort to manipulate public opinion, undermine democratic processes, or destabilize societies. Organized groups or foreign actors often orchestrate these

campaigns with vested interests in influencing political outcomes or social dynamics. By leveraging social media platforms, these actors can amplify their messages and target specific demographics, amplifying the impact of disinformation on public discourse.

2.2.3. The impact of disinformation

The impact of disinformation is profound and far-reaching, affecting various aspects of society and undermining fundamental principles of democracy and social cohesion. Firstly, disinformation erodes trust in institutions that serve as pillars of democracy, including media organizations, government agencies, and civil society groups. By disseminating falsehoods and misinformation, disinformation campaigns sow seeds of doubt and scepticism among the public, weakening the credibility and legitimacy of authoritative sources of information (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Moreover, disinformation fuels social division by exacerbating existing disparities and reinforcing prejudices. By exploiting identity-based grievances and targeting vulnerable communities, disinformation campaigns deepen societal cleavages and foster hostility between disparate groups. This exacerbation of social divisions undermines efforts towards social cohesion, inclusivity, and understanding, contributing to polarization and discord within society (Lewandowsky et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the spread of disinformation poses a direct threat to democratic processes and institutions. Disinformation distorts public discourse, manipulates public opinion, and undermines citizens' ability to make informed choices. In democratic societies, the integrity of elections, policymaking, and governance relies on transparency, accountability, and the availability of accurate information. Disinformation undermines these principles, eroding the foundation of democratic governance and compromising the trust between citizens and their elected representatives (Guess et al., 2020).

In essence, disinformation significantly undermines social cohesion by fostering distrust, exacerbating divisions, and eroding the sense of community and shared values (González & Lelkes, 2022). It achieves this through several mechanisms: erosion of trust in institutions, polarization and division of society, fragmentation of

communities, and undermining of social norms. Addressing disinformation requires concerted efforts to promote media literacy, critical thinking skills, and fact-checking initiatives to mitigate its harmful effects and strengthen social cohesion.

2.2.4. Response to disinformation

The response to disinformation requires a multifaceted approach that addresses its root causes, mitigates its harmful effects, and strengthens societal resilience against its spread. This response involves a combination of regulatory measures, technological innovations, media literacy initiatives, and collaboration between various stakeholders.

Governments play a crucial role in enacting and enforcing laws and regulations to combat disinformation. These measures may include legislation to hold platforms accountable for the spread of disinformation, regulations requiring transparency in online advertising, and legal frameworks to address hate speech and incitement to violence. Effective regulation requires balancing the protection of free speech with the need to prevent harm and uphold democratic values (Talita, 2022).

Technology companies have a responsibility to develop tools and algorithms to identify, flag, and remove disinformation from their platforms. This may involve leveraging artificial intelligence and machine learning to detect patterns of misinformation, enhancing content moderation systems, and improving the transparency of algorithms used to curate content. Additionally, collaboration between technology companies, researchers, and civil society organizations can help develop innovative solutions to combat disinformation effectively (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

Promoting media literacy and critical thinking skills is essential to empower individuals to identify and resist disinformation. Educational programs and initiatives should teach people how to evaluate sources of information critically, discern between reliable and unreliable sources, and recognize common tactics used in disinformation campaigns. Media literacy efforts should target diverse audiences, including students, educators, journalists, and the general public, to build a more resilient society against the influence of disinformation (Farkas & Schou, 2018).

Addressing disinformation requires collaboration and partnership between governments, technology companies, civil society organizations, academia, and the media. These stakeholders must work together to share information, best practices, and resources, coordinate responses to disinformation campaigns, and foster a culture of transparency and accountability. Collaborative efforts can enhance the effectiveness of interventions, promote information sharing, and strengthen resilience against disinformation across different sectors of society (European Parliament, 2020).

Disinformation is a global challenge that transcends national borders, requiring coordinated action at the international level. International organizations, such as the United Nations and the European Union, can facilitate dialogue, cooperation, and coordination among member states to develop common strategies and standards for combating disinformation. Multilateral initiatives should focus on promoting democratic values, protecting human rights, and fostering a free, open, and secure online environment for all users (Global Network Initiative, 2019).

2.3. Hate Speech

2.3.1. Definition

Hate speech represents a form of communication that specifically targets individuals or groups based on certain characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other defining traits. This form of expression manifests through a variety of mediums and channels, ranging from verbal insults and derogatory remarks to threats, harassment, and even incitement to violence (Waldron, 2012).

The essence of hate speech lies in its intention to demean, intimidate, or marginalize individuals or entire communities solely based on perceived differences. It operates on the premise of fostering a sense of superiority or dominance over the targeted groups, often by portraying them in a negative light or dehumanizing them altogether. (Ibid)

For instance, individuals or groups may be subjected to derogatory epithets, racial slurs, or religious insults intended to belittle their identity or heritage. Moreover, hate speech can extend to threats of physical harm, coercion, or acts of violence, creating an atmosphere of fear and insecurity for those targeted. (Ibid)

Based on Ethiopian Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation (2020) Hate speech means speech that promotes hatred, discrimination or attack against a person or an identifiable group, based on ethnicity, religion, race, gender or disability.

The core aim of hate speech is to sow seeds of division, strong hostility, and exclusion within society, ultimately undermining the principles of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination (Brudholm, 2008). By singling out certain segments of the population for scorn or ridicule, hate speech perpetuates harmful stereotypes and reinforces existing power dynamics, often at the expense of marginalized or vulnerable groups.

In this sense, hate speech not only violates the basic rights and freedoms of individuals but also poses a significant threat to social cohesion, democratic values, and inclusive societies. Its pervasive influence can be felt across various domains of public life, from political discourse and social media platforms to everyday interactions in communities.

Addressing the complexities surrounding hate speech requires a nuanced understanding of its underlying mechanisms, motivations, and consequences. By examining its impact on individuals, communities, and broader societal dynamics, we can better grasp the urgent need to combat hate speech and promote a culture of tolerance, respect, and understanding.

2.3.2. Social media hate speech

Social media hate speech refers to the dissemination of discriminatory, offensive, or hostile content targeting individuals or groups based on their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, or other characteristics. It manifests in various forms, including comments, posts, images, videos, and memes, and often perpetuates stereotypes, fosters prejudice, and incites violence or discrimination against marginalized communities (Council of Europe, 2016).

One defining feature of social media hate speech is its accessibility and widespread reach. Social media platforms provide a virtual space where users can express their opinions and engage in discussions publicly, often with minimal barriers to entry. This accessibility, combined with the relative anonymity of online interactions, can

embolden individuals to express hateful or discriminatory views that they might not voice in offline settings (Benesch, 2015).

Social media hate speech represents a significant societal challenge due to its widespread dissemination and potentially harmful impact on individuals and communities. The digital dissemination and accessibility of social media platforms play a crucial role in amplifying the reach and impact of hate speech. Unlike traditional forms of communication, social media allows users to share content instantaneously and globally, reaching a vast audience within seconds (Council of Europe, 2016).

Moreover, the virality of social media hate speech compounds its impact by rapidly spreading divisive and harmful messages across networks (Bradley, 2020). As hateful content gains traction and visibility online, it has the potential to intensify existing social tensions and deepen divisions within communities. The normalization of discriminatory attitudes and behaviours, perpetuated by the widespread dissemination of hate speech, poses a significant threat to social cohesion and inclusivity (Benesch, 2015).

Furthermore, the global reach of social media platforms enables hate speech to transcend geographical boundaries and affect individuals and communities worldwide (Tufekci, 2017). This interconnectedness presents unique challenges in combating hate speech online, as regulatory efforts must navigate diverse legal, cultural, and linguistic landscapes (Talita, 2022). As a result, addressing the proliferation of hate speech on social media requires coordinated international efforts and innovative approaches to promote tolerance and respect for diversity (UN, 2019).

Social media hate speech can have significant real-world consequences. Research has shown that exposure to hate speech online can lead to negative psychological effects, such as increased anxiety, depression, and feelings of insecurity among targeted individuals or communities (Hoffman et al., 2017). Moreover, hate speech has been linked to acts of violence; hate crimes, and social unrest, posing significant threats to public safety and social cohesion (Council of Europe, 2016).

2.3.3. Impact of hate speech

In contemporary society, hate speech has expanded its reach through social media platforms, amplifying its impact on individuals and communities. Social media hate speech refers to the dissemination of discriminatory, derogatory, or inflammatory content targeting individuals or groups based on their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other protected characteristics. This phenomenon has profound implications for social cohesion, democratic values, and individual well-being (Brown & Beall, 2008).

The prevalence of hate speech on social media platforms undermines the very foundations of social cohesion by fostering hostility, intolerance, and exclusion within society (Waldron, 2012). It serves as a catalyst for creating divisions among individuals or groups, fracturing the bonds of trust and understanding necessary for cohesive communities.

Moreover, hate speech directly contradicts fundamental principles of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination, which are vital for the functioning of a just and inclusive society (Brudholm, 2008). By perpetuating inequalities and reinforcing existing power dynamics, hate speech perpetuates systemic discrimination, privileging certain groups while marginalizing others.

Social media hate speech perpetuates harmful stereotypes and prejudices against targeted communities, legitimizing discriminatory practices and attitudes, and hindering efforts towards social cohesion (Waldron, 2012). The dissemination of hateful messages on social media platforms further entrenches social divisions and perpetuates systemic discrimination and inequality.

One of the most concerning aspects of social media hate speech is its potential to incite violence and discrimination against targeted groups (Waldron, 2012). Verbal expressions of hatred and hostility can escalate into physical violence or hate crimes, instilling fear and insecurity among affected individuals and communities.

Furthermore, social media hate speech intensifies tensions between different communities, hindering efforts towards dialogue, reconciliation, and cooperation (Brudholm, 2008). By fostering strong hostility and distrust, it undermines the

prospects for peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding, perpetuating cycles of conflict and division.

The consequences of hate speech extend far beyond immediate harm, posing significant threats to democratic values and social harmony. By undermining principles of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination, hate speech erodes the foundations of democratic societies and undermines the legitimacy of inclusive governance (Waldron, 2012). In essence, hate speech represents a grave threat to the fabric of democratic societies, perpetuating discrimination, division, and exclusion. Its impact extends far beyond individual acts of aggression, posing fundamental challenges to the principles of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination that underpin modern societies.

2.3.4. Response to Hate Speech

Addressing hate speech necessitates a comprehensive approach that encompasses legal, social, and educational interventions aimed at mitigating its harmful effects and promoting social cohesion. Legal measures play a crucial role in deterring hate speech and holding perpetrators accountable for their actions. Legislation that defines and prohibits hate speech provides a framework for prosecuting offenders and enforcing consequences for their discriminatory behaviour (Bleich, 2011). By establishing clear guidelines and consequences, legal frameworks send a strong message that hate speech is unacceptable and will not be tolerated in society.

Moreover, education and public awareness campaigns are instrumental in promoting tolerance, empathy, and respect for diversity. Through educational initiatives in schools, workplaces, and community settings, individuals can learn about the harmful impact of hate speech and the importance of fostering inclusive environments (Zick et al., 2008). These campaigns aim to raise awareness about the destructive nature of hate speech while encouraging individuals to challenge discriminatory attitudes and behaviours in their communities.

Community engagement plays a vital role in fostering inclusive social norms and promoting positive dialogue among diverse groups. By facilitating meaningful interactions and collaborations between individuals from different backgrounds,

community-based initiatives promote understanding, cooperation, and mutual respect (Dovidio et al., 2017). Community-led efforts can include dialogue forums, cultural exchanges, and collaborative projects that encourage solidarity and bridge social divides.

Furthermore, media literacy programs empower individuals to critically evaluate information and recognize instances of hate speech in the media and online platforms. By equipping individuals with the skills to discern between credible sources and misinformation, media literacy initiatives help combat the spread of hateful narratives and promote responsible digital citizenship (Banks, 2019).

2.4. Social Cohesion

Social cohesion refers to the degree of interconnectedness, solidarity, and shared identity among individuals and groups within a society or community (Putnam, 2000). It encompasses the strength of social bonds, mutual trust, and cooperative relationships that contribute to a sense of belonging and solidarity among members of a society (Jenson, 1998). Social cohesion serves as a foundation for social stability, resilience, and collective action, playing a crucial role in fostering inclusive and thriving communities (OECD, 2011).

Robert Putnam's seminal work, "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community" (2000), brought widespread attention to the erosion of social capital and civic engagement in the United States. Putnam's research revealed a decline in community participation, volunteering, and interpersonal trust over recent decades. He observed a shift from traditional forms of social interaction, such as bowling leagues and community organizations, to more individualistic pursuits. Putnam argues that this decline in social cohesion has profound implications for democracy, civic life, and the overall well-being of society.

Through empirical evidence and longitudinal studies, Putnam demonstrates how social cohesion shapes the functioning of democratic societies. Diminished levels of social cohesion contribute to political apathy, declining trust in institutions, and social fragmentation. Communities with higher levels of social cohesion tend to exhibit greater levels of civic engagement, cooperation, and collective problem-solving.

Putnam's research underscores the importance of nurturing social bonds and fostering a sense of community to address societal challenges and promote democratic governance.

Moreover, social cohesion encompasses various dimensions beyond interpersonal relationships. It includes factors such as social trust, mutual respect, and shared values that contribute to a sense of belonging and inclusion within society. Strong social cohesion fosters resilience in the face of adversity, promotes social integration, and mitigates the risk of social conflicts and polarization (Ibid).

Fukuyama (1999) explores the concept of social cohesion in "The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order," emphasizing its role in maintaining societal stability and resilience. He argues that strong social cohesion, characterized by shared values, norms, and mutual trust, enables communities to navigate challenges effectively. This cohesion fosters social integration and collective action, reducing the likelihood of internal conflicts and promoting a sense of solidarity within societies (Fukuyama, 1999).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recognizes the significance of social cohesion as a key determinant of societal well-being and economic development. In its report "Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising" (2011), the OECD emphasizes the importance of addressing social exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination to strengthen social cohesion. The report highlights the role of policies and interventions in reducing inequality, promoting social mobility, and fostering inclusive growth.

2.4.1. The nexus of social media and social cohesion

Social media has undergone a transformative evolution in contemporary society. Boyd and Ellison (2007) have noted that social media platforms have revolutionized interpersonal communication, presenting users with opportunities for personal connection, self-expression, and access to vast pools of information. These platforms have seamlessly integrated into modern life, permeating diverse domains, including commerce, politics, and social activism.

Empirical research on social media has revealed its multifaceted influence. Scholars have emphasized the profound impact of social media on individual relationships and overall well-being (Wang & Solloway, 2012). Concurrently, it has played a pivotal role in shaping public sentiment and catalysing critical social and political movements, such as the Arab Spring and the Black Lives Matter movement (Tufekci, 2014).

While offering numerous advantages, the literature has underscored various challenges associated with social media. One of the predominant themes is the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation on these platforms, which can profoundly influence society (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). The rapid dissemination of false narratives and fake news through these platforms has induced confusion, eroded trust, and incited social discord. Such misinformation possesses the potential to manipulate public perception and intensify societal divisions.

Another compelling area of concern is the surge in cyber-bullying and online harassment; facilitated by the anonymity that social media affords (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018). Instances of harmful online conduct can inflict emotional harm on individuals and, in severe instances, contribute to social discord.

Moreover, polarization is a noteworthy dimension in the context of social media, as highlighted by Sunstein (2017). He observes that social media platform algorithms can cultivate echo-chambers; confining users to content that align with their pre-existing beliefs. This reinforcement of confirmation bias obstructs exposure to diverse viewpoints, ultimately fragmenting communities.

2.4.2. The nexus of hate speech and social cohesion

The nexus between hate speech and social cohesion underscores the intricate relationship between expressions of intolerance and the stability of communities. Hate speech, characterized by its targeting of individuals or groups based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other protected characteristics, poses a significant threat to social cohesion by fostering division, distrust, and exclusion within society (Waldron, 2012).

Hate speech undermines social cohesion by eroding the bonds of trust and understanding that are essential for harmonious coexistence. When individuals or groups are subjected to hateful message, it creates an atmosphere of fear, hostility, and

insecurity, fracturing the social fabric and driving wedges between different segments of society (Kaplan & Small, 2006). Communities become polarized, with individuals retreating into segregated enclaves out of fear or mistrust; further deepening social divisions and hindering meaningful interaction and cooperation.

Moreover, hate speech perpetuates a cycle of violence and retaliation, exacerbating tensions and conflicts within communities. Verbal expressions of hatred and prejudice can escalate into physical violence or hate crimes, leading to a breakdown in law and order and exacerbating feelings of marginalization and alienation among targeted groups (Naber, 2012). In such an environment, social cohesion becomes increasingly elusive, as individuals feel isolated and vulnerable to the threats posed by hate-motivated violence.

The consequences of hate speech reverberate throughout society, affecting not only the immediate targets of discriminatory message but also the broader community as a whole. By normalizing intolerance and legitimizing discriminatory attitudes, hate speech erodes the values of equality, dignity, and respect for diversity that are foundational to social cohesion (Brudholm, 2008). In the absence of mutual respect and understanding, communities become fractured, with individuals retreating into echo chambers of like-minded individuals, further entrenching divisions and preventing the meaningful exchange of ideas and perspectives. (Ibid)

Addressing the nexus between hate speech and social cohesion requires a concerted effort to promote tolerance, empathy, and inclusivity within society. Legal measures can play a crucial role in deterring hate speech and holding perpetrators accountable for their actions, sending a clear message that expression of intolerance will not be tolerated (Bleich, 2011). Additionally, education and public awareness campaigns can help challenge stereotypes, debunk myths, and foster empathy and understanding among diverse communities (Klocker & Dunn, 2003). By promoting intergroup dialogue, fostering empathy, and cultivating a culture of respect and acceptance, societies can work towards building more cohesive and inclusive communities that celebrate diversity and reject hate and discrimination.

2.4.3. The nexus of disinformation and social cohesion

The nexus between disinformation and social cohesion represents a critical intersection where the spread of false or misleading information undermines the fabric of trust, unity, and shared understanding within societies. Disinformation, fuelled by various actors and disseminated through diverse channels, poses profound challenges to social cohesion by eroding trust in institutions, deepening societal divisions, and fostering a climate of uncertainty and polarization (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

At its core, disinformation undermines social cohesion by eroding the foundational elements of trust and credibility upon which cohesive societies rely. When individuals are bombarded with conflicting narratives and disinformation, their confidence in institutions, media sources, and even fellow citizens erodes (Guess et al., 2019). This erosion of trust, fractures the social bonds that hold communities together, leading to increased polarization and a breakdown in mutual understanding.

Disinformation intensifies existing social divisions by amplifying prejudices, exploiting societal fault lines, and deepening ideological rifts. False narratives often target vulnerable communities, stoke fears, and promote divisive ideologies, leading to heightened tensions and animosities (Tandoc et al., 2018). In an environment where disinformation thrives, individuals and groups may retreat into echo chambers, reinforcing their own beliefs while dismissing opposing viewpoints, further entrenching societal polarization.

Moreover, the spread of disinformation undermines democratic processes and institutions, posing a direct threat to the principles of accountability, transparency, and informed decision-making. When disinformation circulates unchecked, it distorts public discourse, manipulates public opinion, and undermines citizens' ability to make informed choices (Guess et al., 2020). This erosion of democratic norms weakens the social contract between citizens and their governing institutions, leading to a loss of confidence in the democratic process itself.

Addressing the nexus between disinformation and social cohesion requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses media literacy, critical thinking skills, and responsible information consumption practices. Citizens must be equipped with the

tools and resources needed to identify and combat disinformation, including fact-checking websites, media literacy programs, and critical evaluation skills (Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

Furthermore, media organizations, technology platforms, and policymakers play a crucial role in combating disinformation by promoting transparency, accountability, and responsible content moderation practices (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This includes implementing effective fact-checking mechanisms, promoting diverse and trustworthy sources of information, and addressing the underlying incentives that drive the spread of disinformation.

Ultimately, fostering social cohesion in the face of disinformation requires a collective effort that transcends individual actions and spans across communities, institutions, and governments. By promoting trust, empathy, and understanding, societies can build resilience against the corrosive effects of disinformation and uphold the values of pluralism, democracy, and social inclusion.

2.5. SM's Impact on Conflict Dynamics and Social Cohesion

Social media's impact on conflict dynamics and social cohesion has been extensively studied and analysed in academic literature. One significant aspect is its role in information dissemination during conflicts. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube enable the rapid spread of news, updates, and user-generated content, shaping public perception and discourse (Chadwick, 2017; Howard et al., 2011).

However, this dissemination can also lead to the amplification of misinformation and propaganda, contributing to polarization and mistrust within societies (Tufekci, 2017).

Furthermore, social media facilitates the mobilization of individuals and groups for social and political causes, including during times of conflict (Earl & Kimport, 2011). Hashtags, online campaigns, and viral content play a significant role in organizing protests, rallies, and other forms of collective action, influence the course of conflicts and social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

In conflict-affected regions, social media often becomes a battleground for competing narratives and ideological struggles. Various actors, including state authorities, opposition groups, and non-state actors, utilize social media to disseminate propaganda, shape public opinion, and mobilize support for their respective causes (Phillips, 2011).

The proliferation of social media platforms has also challenged the traditional role of mainstream media in reporting conflicts. Citizen journalism and user-generated content provide alternative sources of information, offering diverse perspectives and amplifying marginalized voices (Allan & Thorsen, 2009). However, this democratization of information comes with risks, as the lack of editorial oversight may result in the spread of unverified or biased content (Hermida, 2010).

Despite these challenges, social media can also serve as a platform for dialogue, reconciliation, and peace-building. Digital peace-building initiatives leverage social media to facilitate communication and collaboration among conflict-affected communities, promoting understanding, empathy, and conflict resolution (Sobhani & Axinn, 2016).

2.6. Trends of SM Disinformation and Hate Speech in Ethiopia

According to the national report released by the Ethiopian Media Authority, hate speech and disinformation have reached levels that threaten the overall security and peace of the citizens and the country. The report focused on the spread of hate speech and disinformation on five social media platforms (Facebook, Telegram, YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok) from July, 2023, to January, 2024. The report indicated that the spread of hate speech and disinformation has reached an alarming level. Regarding the social media platforms, it was also mentioned in the report that the surveyed platforms did not take appropriate measures in accordance with community protection laws and regulations to remove content that exposes users to violence from their networks and to protect citizens from violence (EMA, 2024).

Many researches indicate that trends of Social Media Disinformation and Hate Speech in Ethiopia have been particularly concerning in recent years, reflecting broader

challenges in managing digital discourse and ensuring social harmony. (ACORD, 2022) Several key trends characterize the landscape:

One key trend is weaponization of historical narratives; these historical grievances are frequently exploited and manipulated on social media to justify present-day conflicts and grievances (Freedom House, 2021). Disinformation campaigns distort historical events and memories to incite strong hostility and justify violence against certain ethnic or political groups. This manipulation of historical narratives intensifies existing tensions and undermines efforts to foster reconciliation and understanding.

The other key trends influence of political actors; including government officials, opposition groups, and their supporters, leverage social media platforms to disseminate propaganda and misinformation (Human Rights Watch, 2021). They use these platforms to shape public opinion, discredit opponents, and advance their political agendas. This manipulation of digital discourse by political actors intensifies social divisions and undermines trust in democratic processes.

The other point social media influencers and online personalities play a significant role in shaping public discourse and disseminating information. They often amplify certain narratives or spread disinformation, blurring the lines between genuine expression and manipulation. Influencers may be co-opted by political or interest groups to advance specific agendas, contributing to the polarization of public opinion (Al Jazeera, 2021).

Based on The New York Times, (2021) false or misleading information spreads rapidly on social media platforms, often going viral before fact-checkers can show up it. Rumours, fabricated stories, and manipulated images or videos contribute to the dissemination of misinformation, which can have real-world consequences, including incitement to violence.

Further Regulating hate speech and disinformation on social media presents significant challenges for Ethiopian authorities. The decentralized nature of social media platforms and the volume of content posted daily make it difficult to monitor and moderate harmful content effectively. Moreover, limited resources and legal frameworks further impede efforts to address these issues comprehensively (Ethiopian Ministry of Innovation and Technology, 2020).

Moreover the pervasive presence of hate speech and disinformation on social media undermines social cohesion and threatens stability in Ethiopia (United States Institute of Peace, 2021). Inter-communal violence, protests, and political unrest often stem from inflammatory message and false narratives propagated on digital platforms. These trends contribute to a climate of distrust, strong hostility, and instability, posing significant challenges to the country's socio-political fabric.

2.7. Theoretical Framework

The research has established a theoretical framework to guide the study its inquiries. The study draws upon Social Identity Theory, proposed by Henri Tajfel in the 1970s; it is a fundamental framework in social psychology that explores how individuals derive their sense of self and belonging from the groups to which they belong (Tajfel, 1978). According to this theory, people categorize themselves and others into various social groups based on shared characteristics, such as ethnicity, nationality, religion, or political affiliation. Through this categorization process, individuals develop a sense of identity and self-esteem based on their group memberships.

In the context of social media and conflict, Social Identity Theory offers valuable insights into how group identities influence online behaviour, perceptions, and attitudes. Individuals tend to seek validation and support from their social groups, and social media platforms provide powerful channels for the expression and reinforcement of these group identities. (Ibid)

For example, during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022), individuals aligned with different ethnic or political groups may use social media to express solidarity with their respective communities, share information that aligns with their group's narrative, and engage in discussions that reinforce their group identity. This phenomenon can contribute to the polarization of online discourse and intensify intergroup tensions.

Moreover, Social Identity Theory highlights the role of social comparison and intergroup dynamics in shaping attitudes and behaviours. Individuals may perceive members of their own group more positively while holding negative attitudes toward members of out-groups. This in-group favouritism can lead to the amplification of

stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory behaviours online, further fuelling social divisions and conflicts (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

So Social Identity Theory helps clarify how social media platforms serve as channels for the expression and reinforcement of group identities, which can potentially intensify intergroup tensions and polarization during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022).

CHAPTER THREE

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

3.1. Introduction

The main goal of this study is exploring the impact of SM disinformation and hate speech on social cohesion during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022). Ethiopia has faced significant challenges in managing digital discourse and ensuring social harmony in recent years. The dissemination of disinformation and hate speech on SM platforms has intensified conflicts in Ethiopia and presented significant challenges for society. Of particular concern is the escalating dominance of disinformation and hate speech, which not only intensifies conflicts but also undermines social cohesion. Therefore, this chapter discusses the philosophical foundation being considered, the methodology and research design employed, the sampling techniques selected, the data sources and collection tools used, data analysis and interpretation, and ethical considerations.

3.2. Philosophical Foundation

This study follows a constructivist research paradigm, which is particularly well-suited given its objective to understand the effects of SM disinformation and hate speech on social cohesion during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022). Constructivism emphasizes the ways in which individuals and groups construct their realities through social interactions and shared meanings, allowing for a nuanced examination of how SM shapes perceptions and influences social dynamics in a conflict setting (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Creswell, 2013).

By adopting a constructivist approach, this study acknowledges that the impact of SM on social cohesion is not a straightforward process but is mediated by the meanings and interpretations that users attach to the content they encounter. This paradigm facilitates a detailed exploration of how various narratives and discourses propagated through social media platforms contribute to the construction of social realities among different ethnic and political groups in Ethiopia (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The complexity of the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022), characterized by intense violence, ethnic tensions, and widespread misinformation, necessitates a research framework that can capture the multifaceted ways in which social media influences social cohesion. The constructivist approach enables researchers to delve into the subjective experiences of individuals and communities, understanding how they perceive and respond to social media content in the context of their social and political environments (Crotty, 1998).

Furthermore, this paradigm supports the investigation of the broader implications of social media interactions for peace-building and conflict resolution. By examining the constructed realities of different groups, researchers can identify the specific ways in which disinformation and hate speech disrupt social cohesion and hinder efforts to foster mutual understanding and reconciliation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

As Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue, the constructivist paradigm is particularly effective in studying phenomena that are deeply embedded in social contexts and shaped by human interpretations. In the case of the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022), where SM plays a critical role in shaping public opinion and social relations, a constructivist approach provides valuable insights into the processes by which social cohesion is either undermined or supported through online interactions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Creswell, 2013).

So the constructivist research paradigm is well-aligned with the study's aim to understand the impact of social media disinformation and hate speech on social cohesion during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022). This approach allows for a comprehensive examination of the ways in which SM influences social dynamics in a complex and volatile conflict situation, providing a nuanced understanding of the interplay between digital communications and social cohesion (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

3.3. Methodology

The researcher utilized qualitative research methods to explore the impact of social media disinformation and hate speech during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022).

3.4. Research Design

In this study, a qualitative research design is employed to explore the multifaceted dynamics of social media's impact on social cohesion during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022). Qualitative research focuses on understanding human behavior, experiences, and perceptions within their natural contexts, making it well-suited for investigating complex social phenomena (Creswell, 2017).

The qualitative research design adopted for this study involves various data collection methods such as interviews, focus groups, and content analysis. Interviews and focus groups allow researchers to explore the perspectives, experiences, and attitudes of individuals directly affected by social media disinformation and hate speech during the conflict (Patton, 2015). These methods enable researchers to delve into the nuanced of social media interactions, perceptions, and behaviors within the context of the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022).

Content analysis is another essential component of the qualitative research design, which involves systematically analyzing social media posts, news articles, and other online content related to the conflict (Neuendorf, 2016). Content analysis provides valuable insights into the themes, trends, and patterns of social media discourse, allowing researchers to identify prevalent narratives, misinformation campaigns, and hate speech incidents circulating on digital platforms.

Furthermore, qualitative research emphasizes flexibility and reflexivity, allowing researchers to adapt their approach based on emerging insights and new perspectives encountered during data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009). This iterative process enables researchers to explore the complexities of social media dynamics and their implications for social cohesion in a conflict-affected context.

3.5. Sampling

The method that is used in this research is non-probability sampling, particularly the purposive sampling methods. The purpose of utilizing non-probability sampling is to select a sample based on specific criteria or judgment rather than random selection, particularly when random sampling is not practical or feasible (Creswell, 2017). Non-probability sampling allows for the intentional selection of participants with specific

characteristics, experiences, or perspectives that align with the research objectives. This approach is especially valuable in qualitative research, where the emphasis is on exploring specific phenomena, understanding individual experiences, and gaining insights into complex social processes (Patton, 2015).

Purposive sampling, also known as judgmental or selective sampling, is a non-probability sampling technique widely used in qualitative research. Unlike random sampling methods, purposive sampling involves the deliberate selection of participants or elements based on specific criteria determined by the researcher (Creswell, 2017). According to Morse (1994), purposive sampling assists in identifying respondents who have relevant knowledge and experience, are able to explain, are assertive, have enough time for an interview, and they are ready to engage in the inquiry. Due to the nature of this study, the researcher chose non-probability sampling, especially purposive sampling, which comprises picking instances based on the researcher's judgments of which will be the most beneficial (Bloor & Wood, 2006). Purposive sampling enables researchers to strategically select participants who can offer valuable insights and information, thereby enhancing the depth and richness of qualitative research findings (Patton, 2015).

After taking into account the nature of the research and other pertinent factors, the researcher selected the aforementioned sampling techniques for this study. The purposive sample method was used to select social media posts, relevant reports, studies, and publications given to reports offering comprehensive analyses, data, and insights into the impact of social media on social cohesion during the conflict. Additionally, the sample utilized to identify key institutions and organizations involved in addressing social media dynamics, disinformation, and hate speech during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022). Representatives from diverse perspectives, including government agencies, human rights organizations, and civil society groups, will be selected for interviews.

3.6. Data Sources and Collection Tools

For this study, two primary methods were employed: content analysis and in-depth interviews. Content analysis was utilized to select and analyse social media posts, reports, studies, and publications pertinent to the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) and

its implications for social cohesion. This method allowed researchers to systematically examine qualitative data, identifying themes, patterns, and trends within the discourse surrounding the conflict. Priority was given to reports offering comprehensive analyses, data, and insights into the influence of social media on social cohesion during the conflict.

Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives from at least five prominent institutions actively engaged in monitoring, reporting, or mitigating the impact of social media on social cohesion. These interviews aimed to gather first-hand perspectives and insights from key stakeholders involved in addressing the challenges posed by social media dynamics during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022). Through qualitative inquiry, the study sought to explore the strategies, challenges, and approaches adopted by institutions to mitigate the adverse effects of disinformation and hate speech on social cohesion.

By combining content analysis and in-depth interviews, the research endeavors to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between social media dynamics and social cohesion during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022).

3.7. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Thematic data analysis was chosen for this study on the "Impact of Social Media on Social Cohesion: Disinformation & Hate Speech during the Tigray Conflict in Ethiopia" due to its qualitative nature, aiming to comprehend, explore, and interpret specific information within the context of the conflict. The process involved several key steps: initially, the extraction of crucial and credible information from the collected data was prioritized. Following this, data with similar or coherent content were grouped and categorized to streamline analysis and interpretation.

Scholars like Braune and Clarke (2006) advocate for thematic analysis as it effectively identifies, analyses, and presents data by organizing it in detail, allowing for the interpretation of various research aspects. This method was preferred over others due to its ability to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic within the context of the Tigray conflict.

Furthermore, the study employed the triangulation method, incorporating various data sources, to enhance the accuracy and reliability of the information gathered. Triangulation ensures data is validated from different perspectives, bolstering the validity of the findings (Creswell, 2017). This methodological approach aligns with the study's objective of obtaining effective insights into how social media influences social cohesion amidst disinformation and hate speech during the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia.

3.8. Ethical Considerations

The researcher understands that ethical considerations are paramount in ensuring the responsible and trustworthy conduct of research. This study adheres to rigorous ethical standards to uphold the integrity of the research process. Approval from the Institutional Review Board (IPSS) is sought, demonstrating a commitment to sound research design and implementation. Confidentiality of participant information is rigorously maintained, with data used solely for research purposes and participants' identities protected through anonymity.

Adherence to ethical guidelines for research involving human participants is imperative. Informed consent is obtained from all participants, and measures are implemented to safeguard their privacy and confidentiality (Smith, 2018). These ethical safeguards are essential to protect the rights and well-being of participants throughout the study, in accordance with established ethical norms in social research.

Furthermore, the researcher adheres to academic writing principles, ensuring that the analysis remains objective and free from bias or political ideology. Efforts are made to present the findings accurately, reflecting a commitment to transparency and integrity in the research process.

CHAPTER FOUR

4. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

In this section of the study, the focus is on understanding how social media influenced social cohesion during the Ethiopian Civil War (2020-2022). Twelve influential social media users were selected from Facebook and Twitter, representing figures from both the federal government and the TPLF, each with substantial followings exceeding 100,000. These individuals, including political analysts, activists, and other key personalities, were pivotal during the conflict, with approximately 1,000 relevant posts analyzed.

From the government side, figures such as Mr. Temesgen Tiruneh, Deacon Daniel Kibret, Mr. Mesay Mekonnen, Ms. Hermela Aregawi, Mr. Dejen Assefa, and Mr. Sulaiman Abdella were selected. From the TPLF side, the chosen figures include Tedros Adhanom (Dr.), Mr. Getachew Reda, Mr. Kassa Hailemariam, Mr. Alula Solomon, Mr. Stalin Gebreslase, and Tsegaye Ararsa (Dr.). This diverse selection ensures a balanced representation across conflicting factions, aiming to uncover how disinformation and hate speech disseminated by these influential users affected Ethiopian society's social cohesion.

The study involved extensive research, reporting, and in-depth interviews with key Ethiopian institutions such as the Ministry of Peace (MoP), Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), Ethiopian Inter-Religious Council (EIRC), Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC), and Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA). These entities contributed to mitigating social media's negative impact on social cohesion, investigating human rights violations related to disinformation and hate speech, promoting peace through dialogue, and regulating media content to foster harmony during conflict.

To enhance the research's credibility, data acquired from the above-mentioned sources were triangulated with document analysis on the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation No. 1185/2020, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution Proclamation No. 1/1995, as well as data

from reputable sources such as EMA's reports, JIT reports, Africa News Channel, BBC, CNN, EBC, VOA, and other relevant international and non-governmental organizations documents.

Accordingly, the data presentation and analysis from the documents, interviews, and content analysis are organized into three sections/themes for clarity and coherence.

4.1. Background of the War

The war between the Tigray region and the Ethiopian federal government has deep-rooted origins in longstanding tensions and disagreements over governance structures and political representation. (Getachew, 2023)

According to Lauren P. Blanchard research's the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), representing one of Ethiopia's ethnic minorities, had been the dominant political party in the country's ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition for almost three decades until Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018.

The EPRDF's system of ethnic federalism, established in the early 1990s, aimed to manage Ethiopia's ethnic diversity by granting significant autonomy to ethnically defined regions. While this system allowed regions like Tigray to exercise self-governance, it also entrenched ethnic divisions and fostered competition for resources and political power (Lauren, 2021).

Repression and abuses of power under the EPRDF often attributed specifically to the TPLF, fuelled grievances and spurred a mass protest movement that brought Abiy to power (Ibid). Abiy, a member of the EPRDF, pledged to open the country politically and economically and commenced reforms. His efforts to mend ties with neighboring Eritrea, long tense by a border conflict and antagonistic relationship with the TPLF, won him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. (Africa Center, 2021)

Later that year, Abiy dissolved the EPRDF coalition and formed the Prosperity Party, which the TPLF refused to join. This move was perceived by the TPLF as an attempt to marginalize their influence and diminish their control over regional autonomy. (Getachew, 2023)

National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) the delay of the 2020 national elections due to the COVID-19 pandemic further intensified tensions (Reuters, 20 May 2021). The TPLF confronted the federal government's decision by holding regional elections in Tigray in September 2020, which the federal government considered illegal (Lauren, 2021).

On May 7, 2021, the Ethiopian government designated the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) as a terrorist organization. The decision, totally approved by the House of Peoples' Representatives (HoPR), cited the group's numerous attacks aimed at reversing democratic reforms and instilling fear among civilians. The government presented evidence of TPLF's orchestration of violence, supported by foreign forces, and thought the designation necessary to prevent further terrorism. (EBC, 7 May 2021)

This act of disobedience was a direct challenge to Abiy Ahmed's government and further escalated the conflict. On November 4, 2020 the TPLF and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government reached a breaking point when the TPLF allegedly launched a surprise night attack on an Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) base in Tigray. This attack led to the deaths of non-Tigrayan soldiers and an attempted theft of heavy weapons. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed declared that this attack on the federal army base "crossed the last red line," and he declared that the TPLF leadership's actions forced him to send the army "to save the country and the region" (Africa Center, 2020). While the Tigray government declared that its forces were acting in self-Defence against a planned federal attack (Lauren, 2021).

Both the federal government and the TPLF employed ethnic narratives to mobilize support and justify their actions. The federal government accused the TPLF of using ethnicity to destabilize the country and undermine national unity. On the other hand, the TPLF framed their struggle as a fight against ethnic oppression and for the preservation of Tigrayan identity and autonomy (Opalo& Smith, 2021). Longstanding territorial disputes, particularly between the Tigray and Amhara regions, also played a critical role in the conflict. Both regions claimed areas along their border, leading to conflicts and mutual distrust. The involvement of Amhara regional forces in the conflict against the TPLF added an additional layer of ethnic rivalry and complexity to the war. (Crisis Group, 2021)

In addition Eritrea's involvement in the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) is rooted in longstanding historical grievances, strategic objectives against the TPLF, and active military engagement, all of which contribute to the overall complexity of the situation. (BBC, 28 Dec. 2020)

4.2. Understanding Social Media Dynamics

4.2.1. Predominant Narratives and Themes

In analyzing the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022), it becomes evident that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have played a crucial role in shaping public discourse and influencing international perceptions of the conflict (Howard & Hussain, 2013). These platforms have been instrumental in disseminating information, presenting various narratives, and influencing the understanding and implications of the conflict (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Examining the predominant narratives and themes presented on social media can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of the conflict and its broader impact.

One of the prominent narratives surrounding the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) is the assertion that the war is ethnically based. During the war, social media platforms became outlets for disseminating information, including narratives that portrayed those who support the Tigray regional government as targeting the Tigray community itself.

For instance, Tigray activist Stalin Gebreselase, with over 200 thousand followers on his Twitter page, highlighted instances where Tigray natives army were reportedly arrested and killed solely because of their ethnicity.



At the same time, Mr. Kassa Hailemariam, one of the TPLF's activist and supporters who stood out in his Twitter campaign during the war, wrote on his Twitter page, where he has over 48,000 followers, that the

attack was carried out to destroy the Tigrayans.

On the other hand Mr. Dejen Assefa, he was a social media activist who supported the federal government during the war and has over 127,000 followers on Facebook.

Among the messages he shared with pictures at the time were:

Let the junta (means TPLF) retweet and expose to the world the horrible acts they have committed against the Amhara people in Chna Kebele in the North Gondar Dabat district. Let's comment and retweet, mentioning world leaders and institutions, while saying #ChenaMassacre! I can't say anything else!



Oromo political analyst and activist Tsegaye Ararsa (Dr.) has more than 100,000 followers on Facebook. During the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022), he wrote that Abiy (referring to the Prime Minister) was "beaten by a drone." He added that the Neftegna believe it is an effort to destroy us (refereeing to the Oromo people) from the ground.

Another narrative that has emerged from the federal government and its supporters is that the TPLF is a terrorist group and a danger to national security. They argue that the TPLF is making efforts to protect its interests and dismantle Ethiopia in collaboration with countries that stand against Ethiopia's interests for the sake of power. For example, The Ethiopian government designated the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) as a terrorist organization, stating that the group is responsible for orchestrating violent attacks with the support of foreign forces. (EBC, 7 May 2021)



Meanwhile, Mr. Temesgen Tiruneh, who has more than 246,000 followers on Facebook and was the head of the Amhara region during the war, wrote that the TPLF terrorist group is working with Ethiopia's enemies to destroy the country.

“... The terrorist Tihneg (TPLF) cut off the hand extended for peace, stabbed and bled the heart ready for forgiveness, ...”

crushed the compassionate guts of all Ethiopians and friends of Ethiopians, and made our stomachs despair. Enemies of Ethiopia and Ethiopians have shown us that they have sworn that even hell will come down to destroy our country together with this terrorist group. It's important to be prepared for all this shit..."



Sulaimana Abdella, a supporter of the federal government during the war and with more than 425,000 followers on his Twitter page, shared a similar message on Twitter. It received almost three thousand likes and shares.

"We are not fighting TPLF; we are battling international powers that hate Ethiopia." This message also received almost three thousand likes and shares.



Dejen Assefa also shared the same idea; "A herd that came to destroy the country, the force that came to save the country may disturb it, but it cannot defeat it" Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed! The meaning of this historical word; The enemy deserves it soon!

In October 10, 2021, a Facebook page with 960 likes i.e. Dejene Assefa posted. The caption used for these photos is translated as:



"The defamation campaign launched by CNN on our airline is a part of the plot to overthrow the government of Ethiopia and return the junta to power!!!! It aims to impose sanctions to harass Ethiopia...etc!!!! But it won't happen to them!!!! They will not succeed!!!! Everyone will be humiliated!!!! Truth will win!!!! Ethiopia will continue to win!!!! By re-tweeting this, let's expose them to stop their conspiracy!!!! May Ethiopia live in glory forever!!!!"

Another narrative circulating on social media during the war is that it is a crime of mass murder and genocide.

This narrative on the part of TPLF members and supporters suggests that there have been attacks and systematic efforts by various groups to destroy the Tigray ethnic

group. Tedros Adhanom (Dr.), who was a member of the TPLF leadership and the head of the World Health Organization (WHO) during the war, Mr. Getachew Reda, who was the spokesperson of the TPLF during the war, and activist Stalin Gebreslasse posted on their Twitter pages are indicative of this. They received almost above three thousand likes and above two thousand shares.



International media and institutions like Amnesty International, US Holocaust Museum and The Economist have also reported on targeted violence, mass killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement of innocent people in Tigray.



On the other hand, those who support the federal government say that the TPLF forces have committed genocide and massacres in the Amhara and Afar regions. Dejene Assefa & Suleiman Abedela who supported the federal government posted on their Twitter pages are indicative of this.



"It was discovered that the terrorist Tigrayan invading forces committed genocide in Anbo Water Kebele in AntiochiaGemza District in North Showa.

More than 600 innocent people were massacred by the terrorist junta in Raya Kobo district in one day! Heart-breaking! But their blood must not have been spilled in vain! Until then, let's be open to the global community! Get re-tweeted!"



"The mass graves of many innocent people who were killed and buried by the terrorist junta, who did not care about the peace and security of

the citizens, were found in Alamata.”

International media and institutions like Amnesty International and EHRC have also reported on targeted violence, mass killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement of innocent people in Amhara (Amnesty International, 2022 & EHRC 2023).



Amnesty International has also released a report on violence, mass killings, sexual assaults and looting targeting innocent civilians in the Amhara region.

“... Persons taking no direct part in hostilities were wilfully killed by parties to the conflict, including ethnic-based killings of more than two hundred Amharas, mostly men, in Maikadra by the Samri accompanied by Tigrayan police and militia on 9 November 2020, ...” (EHRC-OHCHR Report, October 12, 2023)

Another prominent narrative circulating on social media during the war is the "No More" movement. This slogan and campaign have been used to push back against foreign intervention and to assert Ethiopian sovereignty.

The "No More" narrative emphasizes resistance to what is perceived as external meddling in Ethiopia's internal affairs, particularly by Western countries and international organizations.

It frames the war as not just an internal Ethiopian issue but as part of a broader struggle against neo-colonialism and biased international narratives (Africa news Channel, 2021).



According to Ann Fitz-Gerald and Hon. Hugh Segal articles the civil war in Ethiopia's Tigray region has evolved into a multifaceted proxy battleground, drawing in various international actors and interests. On one front, physical confrontations occur between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and Ethiopian federal forces. Meanwhile, social media platforms serve as battlegrounds for competing narratives, shaping international perceptions and responses to the war. (Fitz-Gerald, A. M., & Segal, H., 19 Apr. 2021)

The TPLF portrays its actions as defensive manoeuvres against alleged Ethiopian and Eritrean aggression, leveraging social media to highlight claims of genocide and humanitarian crises. Conversely, the Ethiopian federal government refutes these allegations, emphasizing its provision of aid to millions in Tigray and accusing the TPLF of manufacturing fake Eritrean uniforms. (Ibid)



Geopolitical interests further complicate the war, notably centred on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Egypt and Sudan oppose Ethiopia's plans for the dam's water-sharing arrangements, with military posturing indicating heightened tensions. Beyond water resources, global powers like the US and China vie for influence, with strategic minerals and natural resources at stake. (Ibid)



Many people have participated in the No more campaign, including Ms. Hermela Aregawi, an American of Tigrayan descent, who has stood out in the #NoMore campaign. She has over 465,000 followers on her Twitter page and has post extensively against foreign interference in this war.

Supporters of the "No More" movement argue that international media and Western governments have unfairly targeted the Ethiopian government while ignoring or downplaying the actions of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). They contend that this biased portrayal contributes to misinformation and undermines Ethiopia's sovereignty and efforts to resolve the war independently. (Ibid) The "No More" slogan has gained significant purchase on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, where it is often accompanied by calls for Ethiopians and supporters of

Ethiopia to unite against foreign interference. For example, activists and influencers have used hashtags like #NoMore to mobilize support and spread their message globally. This movement has also seen rallies and protests in various cities worldwide, reflecting the strong sentiment among the Ethiopian diaspora and their allies against perceived external pressures and interventions (Liberation News, 2021).



The "No More" narrative highlights the deep-seated mistrust and resentment towards foreign influence in Ethiopian affairs. It underscores the complexities of the war, where issues of national sovereignty and external intervention are intertwined with internal ethnic and political dynamics. This narrative has played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and mobilizing grassroots support against what is perceived as unjust international analysis and intervention. (Ibid)

4.2.2. Disseminating Disinformation

The Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) saw a significant rise in the dissemination of disinformation, primarily through social media platforms. The Ethiopian federal government and its supporter, as well as the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and its supporters, utilized these platforms to propagate their narratives often resorting to misleading information to strengthen their positions and undermine their opponents (VOA17 Oct., 2021). Both sides in the war engaged in extensive misinformation and disinformation campaigns to shape public perception and gain international sympathy (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). False reports, exaggerated claims, and manipulated images were widely circulated on social media. For instance, the government's denial of external actors' involvement in the war was a case of disinformation, motivated by a desire to placate the international community's concerns over the regionalization of the war. It later emerged that Eritrean forces had been involved in the war since the government declared an offensive against Tigray (Aljazeera, 23 Mar. 2022)

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has admitted for the first time that troops from neighbouring Eritrea entered the northern region of Tigray during the conflict that broke out five months ago, suggesting they may have been involved in abuses against civilians. The admission on Tuesday comes after months of denials from Ethiopia and Eritrea, even as credible accusations from rights groups and residents

mounted that Eritrean soldiers have carried out massacres in Tigray following the start of the Ethiopian government's offensive against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), then the region's governing party. In a wide-ranging speech to parliament, Abiy said on Tuesday Eritrean troops had crossed the border and entered the region because they were concerned they would be attacked by the long-time foe – the TPLF, which dominated Ethiopian politics for decades until Abiy came to power in 2018, had presided over a brutal 1998-2000 war with Eritrea...¹

On the other hand The TPLF claimed that those who were killed in Mai Kadra in Western Tigray were Tigrayans. However, reports from Amnesty International, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), a joint investigation, and various media outlets indicated that the victims were overwhelmingly Amhara. It should be noted that Tigrayans were also killed, reportedly in retaliation for attacks against the Amhara. (Amnesty International, 2022& EHRC, 2023)

“... Persons taking no direct part in hostilities were wilfully killed by parties to the conflict, including ethnic-based killings of more than two hundred Amharas, mostly men, in Maikadra by the Samri accompanied by Tigrayan police and militia on 9 November 2020, ...” (EHRC-OHCHR Report, October 12, 2023) 2

According to research by the European Institute of Peace (EIP), international media that reported the war in Tigray began with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's deployment of the army, without mentioning that this was a response to the TPLF's attack on the Northern Command, either spread disinformation or misinformation. It is unclear whether this omission was accidental or intentional. However, it is undisputed that the war started when the TPLF attacked the Northern Command, where much of Ethiopia's military capability was concentrated. Any government would likely have reacted to such a significant assault. (Moses, et al., 2022)

The TPLF claimed there was a massive build-up of forces before their attack on the Northern Command. This claim can be supported or refuted based on different evidence.

General Bacha Debele of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) mentioned that military preparations were made when the TPLF rejected the new leadership of the Northern Command, though it was unclear if these were offensive or defensive.

¹See - Aljazeera March 23, 2021, Ethiopia PM admits Eritrean soldiers entered Tigray region

² See - EHRC-OHCHR Joint Investigation Report on Tigray Conflict, October 12, 2024 Page 2

Leaders of the Republican Guard, an elite unit, confirmed they were on standby about four or five days before the war began, which supports the TPLF's claim. (Ibid)

However, this claim is contested because more than half of the ENDF troops were already in Tigray, and Eritrean Defence Force (EDF) have historically been stationed at the border. Thus, the TPLF's assertion of a massive deployment is disputable.

Additionally, Ethiopian forces based in Somalia were moved to Tigray only after the war began. According to a military general, the entire Western Command, which later controlled Mekelle from Western Tigray, was initially dispersed on a mission in Benishangul and Gambella. (Ibid)

In addition among the misrepresented images was the portrait of the Catholic Bishop Cardinal and the President of the Islamic Council, Haji Mufti.

According to Haji Mesud Adam, (A.A., 8 Apr. 2024) the General Secretary of the Ethiopian Inter-Religious Council (EIRC) and Head of Public Affairs, said:

When the federal government took control of Tigray after the war, the institution coordinated with religious leaders and travelled to Mekele to calm the people and seek opportunities for peace, as they had done before. They met the people and discussed various issues. A question was raised from the crowd: "Did you come to see our aunt? Are you going to bury us? Why did you come now after sending your armed forces and rations to destroy us?" The reason for this reaction is that before the start of the war, during the Green Development Movement, religious leaders participated in the planting of saplings. Coincidentally, when the Catholic Bishop Cardinal and the President of the Islamic Council, Haji Mufti, were returning from planting saplings, soldiers who were escorting the security forces asked to take pictures with our holy fathers. Some of these photos were posted on their own pages. This picture was also circulated on social media with a different message, suggesting that the holy fathers had accompanied the Defence forces. This is a demonstration of how social media can escalate conflict by misrepresenting images taken at different times and for different purposes.

In a report titled "Tigray Conflict: The Fake UN Diplomat and Other Misleading Stories" published on March 25, 2021, BBC highlighted various instances of disinformation. Among the misleading claims was the case of a supposed a US 'investigation' that did not happen.

Amnesty International published a report on human rights abuses it said were committed by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces in an attack on the historic Tigrayan town of Axum in November 2020. (Amnesty International, 2021)

A US 'investigation' that did not happen



who reports say were killed in a massacre. But USAID says it has never sent an investigation team to Axum. "USAID has neither conducted an investigation nor sent a team to investigate the reported events that took place in Axum," it said in a statement released on Twitter.³

In addition as indicated in the subtitle of the same report, "The 'UN Diplomat' Who Can't Be Traced,"

The allegations were rejected by the Ethiopian government, which described them as "fabricated."

Subsequently, a report by the pro-government Ethiopian Herald claimed that an investigation team from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) had visited Axum but "could neither find a single burial place nor meet with relatives" of people



The official Ethiopian Press Agency (EPA) has reported that a senior diplomat, formerly with the UN, has been tweeting in support of Ethiopia's cause. The EPA's Facebook account reposted a tweet in the name of one George Bolton, with the handle @GboltonUN. "Mr Bolton" - describing himself as a political analyst and former UN official - calls the Tigrayan leadership "brutal", notes that Ethiopia's leader won the Nobel Peace prize, and says the US should stay out of the conflict.

The same post appeared on the EPA's Amharic and Tigrinya Facebook pages. But we've found no online profile for this individual and the UN has told us they have no record of a current or former employee with that name - in personnel records that go back at least a decade.⁴



Furthermore, according to Ethiopia Current Issues Fact Check, among the misleading images circulated was one purportedly showing the bodies of victims massacred in Axum. However, this picture was actually taken in November 2020 in Nigeria.

³ See – BBC March 25, 2021 Tigray Conflict: The Fake UN Diplomat and Other Misleading Stories <https://www.bbc.com/news/56456535>

⁴ Ibid

Another TPLF supporter claimed that the Tigray Defence Force (TDF) is about to take over Addis Ababa, that the Abiy government has fallen, and that foreign countries are deporting their citizens. For example, Stalin Gebreselassie and Tsegaye Ararsa (Dr.) spread this on Twitter and Facebook.



4.2.3. Disseminating Hate Speech

Hate speech targeting specific ethnic groups or nationalities is a serious issue that can fuel discrimination, violence, and societal division. Both sides used derogatory terms and inflammatory language to incite hatred against the people and the groups (Crisis Group, 2021). For example Tigray activist Alula Solomon, who has 300 followers on his Facebook, has deleted his video message from his page, but his message has been circulated on others. He said that;

"Ethiopia is humiliated. Ethiopia is a dirty country. Ethiopianism is a self-destructive identity. We are free from now on. Tigrayans, you are free from this burden. You can always establish a denomination that is recognized worldwide. Do not attend the church where Ethiopians go. Separate yourselves from that traitor Orthodox Church. Establish your own shared church with Tigrayan priests. Don't buy bread, pepper and meat from Ethiopian shops. They add poison the food to harm yours, not for money. Don't buy from Ethiopian shops. Don't purchase anything, especially from this only flat flagship store. Don't even buy spices. Remove all associations with Ethiopian names. Don't greet anyone who is Ethiopian; Stop eating and drinking with Ethiopians. Those who are married to Ethiopians, have children, and get divorced, should drive him or her out of the house. As an Ethiopian, especially if he is Amhara, don't befriend him. We must work for the destruction of Ethiopian Airlines. We also inform the whole team that the disgrace of Ethiopian Airlines is built on human blood. We will work for the name of Ethiopian Airlines to be revoked from the Star Alliance Group. Oromo and Eritreans should not use Ethiopian Airlines. Our greatest victory in this war is to erase the identity of Ethiopia. Goodbye, Ethiopia. We shook her. Bye-bye."⁵

⁵ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61b8gnzLW8o>

On the other hand, Deacon Daniel Kibret, an adviser to the prime minister with over 200,000 followers on his Twitter page, has circulated a video message about the Weyane (refers to TPLF) on social media.

However, the full video message by Martin Plaut, a journalist specializing in the Horn of Africa and Southern Africa, has been turned into an article and posted on his website (Martin, 2022). This is what the message looks like when summarized:

Daniel Kibret's speech emphasizes the extreme and incomprehensible nature of the actions of the Weyane, arguing that their behaviour cannot be logical, scientific, or rational understanding. He suggests that Weyane's behaviour is so extreme that it cannot be grasped by a rational mind or explained to future generations. Instead of attempting to understand Weyane, he stresses that it should be eradicated. (Ibid)

He provides traumatic examples of Weyane fighters' actions, such as celebrating near the bodies of Ethiopian soldiers, looting hospitals, and committing acts of senseless desecration and violence. These actions, he argues, cannot be analysed through conventional means like philosophy, science, or psychology, as they fall outside the bounds of normal human behaviour. He suggests that trying to rationalize Weyane is useless and that their behaviour must be eradicated rather than understood. (Ibid)

Drawing parallels to historical atrocities committed by Western colonizers, Daniel suggests that Weyane's extreme behaviours are not extraordinary but are difficult to comprehend and address even in modern times. He likens Weyane's actions to the genocide actions of the past, such as the destruction of the Tasmanian tribes by Australians and the decimation of Native Americans by early American settlers. He implies that Weyane's actions are driven by an unconscious alignment with Western colonial brutality, explaining the lack of condemnation from Western nations. He argues that such behaviour is beyond rational explanation and should not be understood or rationalized but eradicated. (Ibid)

The messages from Alula Solomon and Daniel Kibret have serious consequences for Ethiopia, deepening ethnic hatred and division. Alula urges Tigrayans to cut social and economic ties with Ethiopians, especially targeting Amharas, and promotes

segregation by creating separate institutions. He also calls for discrediting national symbols like Ethiopian Airlines, fostering mistrust and potential violence. Daniel dehumanizes the TPLF, likening their actions to genocides, and argues for their eradication, justifying extreme measures and escalating war. Together, these messages promote an "us versus them" mentality, increasing the likelihood of revengeful violence and threatening national unity.

In addition dehumanizing language was frequently employed to undermine social cohesion. For instance, Tigrayan forces were often referred to as “terrorists”, “parasites,” “cancer”, “monster”, and so on; while Ethiopian federal forces were labelled as “genocide”, “fascist”, “invaders”, “animal army”, and so on. This kind of language was designed to belt the opposing side of their humanity and make extreme measures against them seem justified. For example on the side of TPLF supporter: Staline and Kassa report that Mekele is under attack by the forces of Abiy Ahmed's government. Kassa retweeted a statement describing the violence as unparalleled, accusing the armies of Abiy and Isaias of committing atrocities in Tigray. This includes the killing of a mother and her two-day-old baby, with instructions allegedly given to kill any male aged seven and older. Mercenaries are reportedly on a killing spree in Shire, Adwa, and Axum. Kassa further posted about hyenas scavenging on corpses and cities and towns being hit by airstrikes, describing a total siege and horrific accounts of the war that has left tens, if not hundreds, of thousands dead in Tigray.



The side of pro Federal Government during the war: Mr. Mesay Mekonnen, with 220,000 Facebook followers, uses dehumanizing language in his posts. He describes the Tigray region as an "earthly hell" facing imminent catastrophe. He accuses the "cancerous TPLF cliques" of leading the region into a horrific situation.

He also mentions that the aid-dependent region is waging war against the Ethiopian people and confirms the death of "monster" Getachew Assefa.



Suleiman also included another image in his article showcasing the dehumanizing language, where the TPLF is described as a terrorist and a parasite.



Furthermore social media platforms saw coordinated hate speech campaigns aimed at demoralizing and intimidating each other. For example, viral posts and hashtags would often call for violence against each other or accuse them of being collectively responsible for the actions of the TPLF or Amhara Special Force (ASF) or Ethiopian government. Such campaigns not only incited immediate violence but also had long-term implications for ethnic relations within Ethiopia. For example:



Daniel's message is presented in poetry and the translation of the message: *The name of today's day is it's a lot of trouble; they are rude; bury them very much. As soon as we got up, there was a lot of trouble. For Hiwi (refer to TPLF);* this message has 2.7 thousand likes.

Translation of Suleiman's message: *The TPLF and termite organizations have one thing in common: cutting down large trees where they can hide in summer and cold. TPLF as a leader started to say that he would destroy the people he ruled and he did it.* This message has two thousand likes.



Haji Mesud Adam, the General Secretary of the EIRC and Head of Public Affairs, describes the hate speech during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022).

When we saw the war in Tigray, social media was overwhelmed with hate speech. The political situation was full of hatred, with one side being called the enemy of all Ethiopians. On the other side, people in Tigray spoke about Ethiopia as if Tigray was not part of it, which was very offensive. It wasn't just social media; mainstream media also failed to reduce the hate speech. This lack of respect for ethics in the media needs professional attention.

Mr. Tamrat Dejene, (10 May 2024) the authority's strategic affairs and capacity building chief executive, also said:

There was an increase in hateful speech stemming from political alignments on both sides. You Tubers, seeking to increase their income, intensified the conflict, negatively impacting social interaction and fracturing communities that had tolerated and respected each other for centuries. Not only social media but also traditional public communication institutions have contributed to weakening social bonds by promoting hate.

According to Mr. Tibebu Hailu, (28 March 2024) a human rights expert in the civil and political department of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission,

The commission investigated human rights violations that occurred after the killing of artist Hachalu Hundessain 2020. In the investigation report, there was a link between social media messages and the human rights violations that followed. As a result of these messages, people were hurt, and there was damage to life, body, and property.

During the war, investigations and monitoring took place. However, it is mainly on social media that human rights violations happened, and nothing has been done to prove it, although the impact is clear. We were in the context of the first conflict, and in this situation, we can understand that social media messages can have a polarizing effect and cause harm.

4.2.4. Regulatory Challenges and Responses

Amnesty International has accused Facebook of playing a detrimental role in the violence during the two-year war in Ethiopia's Tigray region. In its report, Amnesty contends that Facebook's algorithms significantly amplified harmful message, contributing to ethnic violence and exacerbating tensions.

One significant instance highlighted in the report involves Professor Meareg Amare, a Tigrayan university professor who was killed after Facebook posts targeted him with false accusations and personal information. His son, Abraham Meareg, stated that these posts contributed directly to his father's death. The posts included his name, photo, workplace, and home address, along with unfounded accusations of supporting the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and financial misconduct, which were denied by his family. (Amnesty International, 2023)

Meta was aware of the risks and the inadequacies of its mitigation measures in Ethiopia. Despite warnings from civil society organizations, human rights experts, and Meta's own Oversight Board, the company did not take sufficient action to address the spread of harmful content. An internal Meta document from 2020 acknowledged that "current mitigation strategies are not enough" to prevent the spread of harmful content in Ethiopia, a country identified as being at high risk of violence.

The rights group argues that Facebook failed to implement sufficient measures to prevent the spread of hate speech and inflammatory content on its platform during this period.

The Ethiopian civil war involved the federal government and its allied forces on one side, and the Tigrayan forces on the other. Social media, particularly Facebook, was a critical source of information and communication for many Ethiopians during the war. However, the platform's role came under intense scrutiny as it allegedly facilitated the spread of hate speech and incitements to violence, which further inflamed the already volatile situation.

Facebook, which is operated by its parent company Meta, has previously denied similar allegations. Meta has asserted that it has invested heavily in content moderation and efforts to remove hateful and harmful content from its platform (BBC, 2023). Despite these claims, critics, including Amnesty International, have argued that these measures were insufficient or inadequately enforced. The inquiry over Facebook's role highlights the broader issues of how social media platforms can influence conflicts and the spread of misinformation and hate speech.

The Amnesty report indicates that the algorithms used by Facebook tend to prioritize content that generates strong reactions, which often includes provocative and inflammatory posts. This dynamic can lead to a rapid spread of harmful message, particularly in conflict situations where emotions and tensions are already high. The report suggests that Facebook's failure to effectively moderate this content contributed to real-world violence and ethnic targeting in Ethiopia (Amnesty International, 2023).

In response, Meta has emphasized its commitment to improving content moderation and has pointed to its investments in technology and human resources aimed at curbing the spread of harmful content (Amnesty International). However, the challenges of moderating content in multiple languages and cultural contexts, particularly in regions with limited digital literacy and effective misinformation networks, remain significant hurdles. (ACCORD, 2022)

The situation in Ethiopia's Tigray region serves as a stark example of the powerful impact social media can have on real-world events, particularly in conflict zones. It underscores the urgent need for social media companies to enhance their efforts in monitoring and managing content that can incite violence and division, as well as the need for accountability and effective regulatory frameworks to address these challenges. (CFR, 2022)

According to Proclamation No. 1185/2020 aims to prevent and suppress hate speech and disinformation in Ethiopia. Hate speech, defined as speech promoting hatred or discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, race, gender, or disability, is prohibited, as is disseminating disinformation likely to cause public disturbance or violence. Certain exemptions apply, such as academic studies, news reports, artistic expression, or religious teaching. Criminal liability includes imprisonment or fines for offenders, with harsher penalties for offenses committed through social media or broadcast services. Institutions and service providers are tasked with suppressing hate speech and disinformation, with requirements for prompt removal and public reporting. Public awareness campaigns are also mandated to combat hate speech and disinformation.

This proclamation was issued by the House of Peoples' Representatives (HoPR) in 2020. Mr Tamrat Dejene, the authority's strategic affairs and capacity building chief executive, said that following the release of the proclamation, the Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA) conducted reporting and awareness training.

Regarding the results obtained through reporting and awareness rising, Mr. Tamrat said:

"After the annual report is submitted according to the proclamation, the time is short to evaluate the changes or actions taken by the social service providers. However, at the end of the year, we will inform the bodies mentioned in the summary recommendation of the work done regarding the matter. However, efforts are being made to establish a remote connection with META and open an office in Addis Ababa. Efforts are being made to communicate with others. Since many of them have not opened a branch in the country, it was not possible to contact them easily."

Another aspect is to prevent and control the spread of hate speech and disinformation, as stated in Article 8 of Proclamation No. 1185/2012, which calls for the coordination of multi-stakeholder bodies under the responsibility of institutions and service

providers. Mr. Tamrat explained what the coordination work looks like from this point of view.

"Regarding coordination work, as mentioned in the proclamation, it shows that the work requires the coordination of many stakeholders. Based on this, various communications and consultations have been held with those mentioned in the proclamation and with other relevant Ethiopian media councils, journalists' associations, the Council of Religious Institutions, the Human Rights Commission, and similar institutions. However, the coordination work is not being done in a properly organized, uniform, regular, and consistent manner. One of the reasons is that our country has not issued detailed regulations and guidelines but rather a proclamation.

On the other hand, in sub-number 6 of proclamation number 8, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission states that it will implement awareness programs to help prevent hate speech. Mr. Tibebu Hailu, a human rights expert in the civil and political department of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, said that the Commission's work was limited in this regard. According to him:

Efforts have been initiated, but they are not complete. Before exploring what will enable us to fulfil our responsibilities under the proclamation, we conducted a basic assessment of what constitutes hate speech and disinformation in general. What's wrong with that assessment? First we attempted to identify the gaps in the proclamation; second we behaviour the factors that led to the spread or proliferation of hate speech and disinformation. We tried to determine our course of action based on this assessment. So there are several aspects we delved into in detail. For example, we examined the loopholes in the proclamation because, as a human rights institution, our mandate is to promote human rights. The Misinformation and Hate Speech Act was initially enacted to restrict rights to prevent the spread of disinformation and hate speech. Therefore, it is imperative to strike a balance between controlling such speech and promoting rights on both sides. We need to thoroughly assess whether the law designed to achieve this balance meets international human rights standards.

Apart from this, we also behaviour the factors contributing to the proliferation of hate speech and disinformation within the current political, economic, and social context. For instance, we examined the media landscape and the role of media institutions in the country. Additionally, we looked at the involvement of intermediaries, telecommunication providers, social media platforms, and intelligence agencies. Understanding their roles is crucial, especially considering that international standards in this regard are still evolving. The Hate Speech Act imposes restrictions on freedom of speech. While people have the right to express their opinions freely, it is necessary to prevent harm to others due to this right. Article 29 of the Ethiopian Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of expression. Additionally, General Comment 34 of the Human Rights Committee provides guidance on this matter. It outlines three factors: the Legality Test, Necessity Test, and Proportionality Test. Any law restricting freedom of speech should meet these criteria and it should be clear, necessary for societal development, and balanced between restrictions and rights. So, the proclamation has several gaps that need to be addressed to ensure that it aligns with international human rights standards and effectively balances the need to combat hate speech and disinformation with the protection of fundamental rights.

Mr. Tamrat, the authority's strategic affairs and capacity building chief executive, emphasized the necessity of on-going efforts until the regulations and guidelines are established.

These efforts primarily aim to promote responsible online behaviour and uphold professional media standards in Ethiopia, thereby fostering community cohesion. The Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA) is actively engaged in raising awareness and informing social media service providers about the forthcoming guidelines to ensure adherence to community standards. Additionally, there is a strong focus on expanding media literacy programs to improve public understanding of online conduct. Special attention is dedicated to supporting journalists from smaller media outlets and community-based stations to uphold professional ethics. The EMA also plans to launch an online media campaign on its website, featuring relevant content and guidelines to further educate the public. Furthermore, the agency encourages, assists, and monitors media organizations in prioritizing narratives that promote unity. Collaborative partnerships with social media service providers are also being established to effectively promote responsible online behaviour.

4.3. Implications for Social Cohesion

The Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) has profound implications for social cohesion in Ethiopia. The war, characterized by intense violence, ethnic tensions, and widespread disinformation, (Earl & Kimport, 2011) has deeply challenged Ethiopian society. The challenges to social cohesion are numerous and complex, encompassing immediate humanitarian concerns and long-term socio-political stability.

4.3.1. Undermining Social Cohesion

The social cohesion essential for Ethiopia's stability has been severely undermined by the spread of hate speech and disinformation during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022). According to Mr. Firesenbet Bersuerga, (18 April 2024) a Public Relations expert at the Ministry of Peace, disinformation and hate speech spread through social media have a negative impact on social cohesion in Ethiopia.

When divisive narratives and misinformation circulate on social media, they can sow mistrust and hatred between different groups in society. The hatred sown during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) has cost us extremely. Instead of fostering understanding and empathy, such content causes greater tension and breakdowns in social relationships.

Especially in our country, Ethiopia, where there are many ethnic groups and cultures, communities have lived together for centuries. However, recently, along with other political, economic, and similar problems, the spread of false information and hate speech is endangering the unity of the community. By promoting stereotypes, fuelling prejudices, and highlighting misunderstandings, these harmful

messages undermine the sense of togetherness and unity necessary for a caring and inclusive society.

Moreover, the proliferation of social media allows disinformation and hate speech to reach large audiences quickly, amplifying their impact and exacerbating existing social divisions. As trust in institutions and between them decreases, the structure of society weakens, making it difficult to tolerate separation and to create a sense of solidarity and respect among all Ethiopians.

MR. Tibebe Tadesse, (27 March 2024) ENDC's Media, Communication and Outreach Coordinator said that,

The Ethiopian civil war deeply divided our society, with hateful messages spreading quickly through digital channels. Government officials, religious leaders, and influential individuals, both at home and abroad, used the internet to fuel tensions, undermining our social unity. Unfortunately, our society hasn't set clear guidelines for digital media use, leading to further chaos. In contrast, other countries have managed digital platforms more responsibly, promoting social cohesion. In our case, discussions about digital media only worsen the divide. It's crucial to address this issue to repair our cracked relationships and promote a more united society.

Moreover, social media has played a role in perpetuating stereotypes that contribute to the division of Ethiopian society. By repeatedly portraying certain ethnic groups in a negative light, these platforms reinforce prejudices and hinder efforts to build a cohesive national identity. This stereotyping can lead to social segregation, where communities become insular and less willing to engage with those perceived as different or threatening. The African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD, 2021) has observed that social media's role in spreading stereotypes has significantly damaged interethnic relationships, making reconciliation and peace-building more difficult.

The erosion of social cohesion due to hate speech and disinformation poses a substantial challenge to Ethiopia's unity and long-term stability. Without a strong sense of community and mutual trust, the country faces the risk of on-going ethnic trouble and division.

4.3.2. Immediate Humanitarian Concerns

The Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) has led to severe humanitarian crises, marked by significant casualties, widespread displacement, and extensive infrastructure destruction. These immediate issues pose substantial barriers to community recovery and the rebuilding of trust. The war has displaced millions, forcing them into

overcrowded camps where basic needs such as food, water, and medical care are often unmet (UN OCHA, 2021). The destruction of critical infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, and roads, further make worse the humanitarian situation, making it difficult for relief organizations to reach affected populations and provide necessary assistance (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Misinformation and disinformation circulating on social media further complicate these humanitarian efforts. False narratives and misleading information can distort the realities on the ground, leading to mistrust between aid providers and recipients. For example, rumours about the affiliations or intentions of aid organizations can result in their access being blocked by local groups or authorities who perceive them as biased or hostile (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Additionally, misinformation can cause panic and chaos among displaced populations, making it harder to coordinate effective relief operations (UNICEF, 2021).

The dissemination of false information can also twist public perception of the conflict, influencing the response of international donors and humanitarian agencies. If the severity of the crisis is downplayed or misrepresented, it can lead to inadequate funding and resources being allocated to the region (International Crisis Group, 2021). Conversely, exaggerated reports of violence or suffering can lead to a misallocation of resources, with aid being diverted to areas where it is less needed, leaving the most affected populations underserved.

In such a volatile environment, rebuilding trust within and between communities becomes a formidable challenge. The pervasive mistrust fuelled by misinformation hinders collaborative efforts necessary for effective humanitarian response and recovery. Communities become fragmented, with each group relying on its own sources of information and distrusting others. This division not only impedes the immediate relief efforts but also sets back long-term peace-building and reconciliation processes (Raleigh & Linke, 2019).

Overall, the humanitarian impact of the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) is profound and multifaceted, with misinformation playing a significant role in complicating relief efforts. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to combat

disinformation, promote accurate reporting, and foster cooperation among all stakeholders involved in the humanitarian response.

4.3.3. Erosion of Trust

One of the most immediate impacts of hate speech and disinformation is the erosion of social cohesion among different ethnic and social groups (Tufekci, 2017). When disinformation and inflammatory messages circulate unchecked, they sow seeds of doubt and suspicion (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). This atmosphere of distrust disrupts the social bonds that are crucial for mutual cooperation and support, weakening the overall unity of the community. According to Mr. Firesenbet, a PR expert of the MoP; describes of hate speech and disinformation impact on Trust during the war.

The spread of hate speech and disinformation create tension and conflict, disturbing the peace among different groups. This disruption breaks the unity that once existed in communities, leading to more division and hostility. When false and inflammatory stories spread, they create doubt among people, making it hard for them to trust each other. This doubt turns into widespread distrust, making it difficult for people to rely on one another or on institutions meant to help and protect them. The loss of trust weakens the community, as people become more suspicious and less willing to work together. This environment of distrust not only damages social interactions but also makes public institutions seem unreliable and unfair. As a result, the ability of communities to work together for peace and mutual support is greatly reduced, leading to a more divided and conflicted society.

Social cohesion, which relies heavily on trust, is vital for maintaining societal stability and facilitating peace-building. However, the spread of disinformation on social media platforms distorts the reality of conflicts and fosters mistrust among various ethnic groups. This misinformation undermines the credibility of both governmental and non-governmental organizations involved in peace-building efforts, making it challenging for them to gain the trust necessary to promote dialogue and reconciliation (Guess et al., 2019).

The pervasive presence of disinformation on social media intensifies divisions and hinders the creation of a cohesive society. Without trust, communities struggle to work together towards common goals, and the efforts to build a unified and stable society are significantly hindered. Addressing the spread of hate speech and disinformation is therefore essential to restoring and maintaining social cohesion..

4.3.4. Undermine National Unity & Social Harmony

Social media has significantly undermined national unity and social harmony in Ethiopia by promoting divisive messages. Hate speech targeting specific ethnic groups has led to increased polarization and under pressure relationships between communities that once lived peacefully together. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter have often portrayed certain ethnicities negatively, contributing to ethnic violence and discrimination. This disruption is evident in the fragmentation of society along ethnic lines, where communal relations have deteriorated, and incidents of ethnic violence have increased. According to Haji Mesud Adam, the General Secretary of the EIRC and Head of Public Affairs:

During the Ethiopian civil war, social media was flooded with intense and divisive discussions. The political climate at that time severely disrupted social harmony, with strong biases creating deep divisions. The TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) was widely portrayed as the enemy of all Ethiopians, while many in Tigray saw Ethiopians as their adversaries. Additionally, inflammatory statements like "Ethiopia is not Tigray" or "Tigray is not a part of Ethiopia" further fuelled conflict and were deeply offensive. This issue extended beyond social media; mainstream media also struggled to stop the spread of hate speech. The widespread disregard for journalistic ethics and the spread of inflammatory messages significantly harmed social harmony, highlighting the urgent need for greater professional responsibility in media practices to promote unity and understanding.

Another impact is that hate speech and disinformation often emphasize ethnic and group identities over a shared national identity, thereby undermining national unity.⁶ In Ethiopia, where ethnic federalism already complicates the sense of a cohesive national identity, these divisive narratives further polarize society. The portrayal of certain groups as perpetual victims or aggressors entrenches an 'us versus them' mentality, making it challenging to foster a unified national consciousness. This division hinders efforts to build an inclusive nation where all citizens feel valued and protected. (Ibid)⁷

When considering the impact of social media agendas, it is necessary to look at how they might affect the unity of the country.

⁶See – The reporter. (May 4, 2024). "Divided we fall: Ethiopia's toxic ethnic politics and the erosion of a national identity". <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/39879/>

⁷Ibid

According to Mr. Tibebu Tadesse, the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission's Media, Communication and Outreach Coordinator, SM plays a significant role in issues arising from various causes, such as the country's structure, law, politics, economy, and other factors.

External forces also have a role in this dynamic. Countries or governments that see Ethiopia's national interest and unity as a threat may challenge that unity. The more united Ethiopia is; the stronger and more influential it will be in geopolitics. Therefore, the agenda-setting on social media can come from both within the country and from external sources. Social media can influence national unity by spreading narratives that either support or undermine cohesion. These narratives can be shaped by various stakeholders, including political groups, economic interests, and even foreign entities. The way the country is portrayed and discussed on social media platforms can have profound effects on public opinion and social cohesion. When divisive content is amplified, it can create rifts within the society, whereas content promoting unity and solidarity can help strengthen social bonds. Furthermore, the impact of social media is not confined to domestic affairs. External actors with geopolitical interests might use social media to influence public perception and political stability in Ethiopia. For example, narratives that question the legitimacy of the government or highlight ethnic divisions can be propagated to weaken national unity and disrupt the country's influence in the region.

On the other hand Religion in Ethiopia plays a crucial role in fostering national unity and social harmony. The country is known for its rich religious diversity, encompassing Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Protestantism, and various indigenous faiths. These religious communities have historically contributed to the nation's cultural cohesion and social stability.

One significant example is the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which has been a unifying force for centuries. It not only provides spiritual guidance but also plays a vital role in promoting social values and community cohesion. The Church's festivals, such as Timkat (Epiphany) and Meskel (Finding of the True Cross), are national celebrations that bring together people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, reinforcing a sense of shared identity and national pride (Isaac, 2011).

Similarly, Islamic communities in Ethiopia have been instrumental in promoting peace and understanding among different religious groups. Events such as the Mawlid al-Nabi (the Prophet Muhammad's birthday) and Eid celebrations are observed with mutual respect and often involve interfaith participation, fostering harmony and unity (Erlich, 2010).

Protestant churches and other religious organizations also engage in social and charitable activities that bridge ethnic and religious divides. These efforts include education, healthcare, and social justice initiatives that emphasize the common good and collective progress. Religious leaders frequently act as mediators in conflicts, advocating for peace and reconciliation. Their influence and moral authority are pivotal in addressing communal tensions and promoting dialogue (Deepa et al., 1999).

According to Haji Mesud (A.A., 8 Apr. 2024) Adam, the General Secretary of the EIRC and Head of Public Affairs; highlights the role of Ethiopian religious institutions in fostering national unity and peace for centuries these religious institutions such as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Islamic Council, the Ethiopian Catholic Church, and the Council of Ethiopian Evangelical Believers have structured leadership, rules, and decision-making processes. However, during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022), these institutions especially Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Islamic Council did not act collectively or determinedly.

Haji Mesud, (A.A., 8 Apr. 2024) notes that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, led by Archbishop Abune Matias, a native of Tigray, was criticized for its perceived lack of institutional action. Despite the church's influential position, the church did not officially endorse individual actions of clergy members such as carrying crosses and wearing church clothing while supporting the defence forces, yet no formal denial was issued. This gap in response created ambiguity about the church's stance.

Similarly, the Ethiopian Catholic Church, the Ethiopian Church of Mekan Eyesus, and the Seventh Day Adventist Church, among others, continued to support their followers in Tigray through international organizations, maintaining salaries and aid during the war. However, the majority of Tigrayans are Orthodox Christians or Muslims, and the intertwining of regional identity with religious affiliation complicated the situation.

Haji Mesud (A.A., 8 Apr. 2024) criticizes the church leadership for not clearly distancing itself from politically charged statements made by clergy members. For instance, Abune Petros, the church's executive secretary, made controversial remarks that did not reflect the church's official position. Furthermore, actions by Ethiopian

clergy in the U.S. and statements made by religious leaders at the White House were seen as personal rather than institutional.

Haji Mesud underscores that religion should promote forgiveness, unity, humility, peace, and love. He argues that the church should have taken a stronger stand against the war and advocated for peace and reconciliation, rather than appearing to align with divisive actions. Historical examples, such as the resistance led by Abune Petros during the Italian invasion, demonstrate the church's potential role in national defense and moral leadership. However, Haji Mesud believes that the church's actions during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) did not live up to these principles, thus failing to support unity and peace in Ethiopia.

4.4. Implications for Peace-building Efforts

The Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) has profound implications for social cohesion and peace-building efforts in Ethiopia. The conflict, characterized by intense violence, ethnic tensions, and widespread disinformation, has deeply challenged (Sobhani & Axinn, 2016) Ethiopian society. The challenges to social cohesion and peace-building are numerous and complex, encompassing immediate humanitarian concerns and long-term socio-political stability.

4.4.1. Hindrance to Peace-Building Efforts

Peace-building efforts in Ethiopia have been significantly challenged by the pervasive spread of disinformation and hate speech on social media. These digital campaigns not only incite violence but also entrench existing grievances and historical animosities, (Tandoc et al., 2018) making reconciliation difficult. Effective peace-building requires a foundation of trust and accurate information, (Bleich, 2011) but the current social media environment often works against these principles by spreading misinformation and encouraging divisive narratives. This complicates efforts to foster dialogue and understanding between conflicting parties.

Social media platforms have been instrumental in spreading hate speech that incites violence. Messages that dehumanize and vilify certain ethnic groups have led to real-world attacks and escalations of conflict (Council of Europe, 2016). For example,

inflammatory posts and videos that demonize Tigrayans have fuelled ethnic violence, resulting in deaths, displacements, and widespread fear. Human Rights Watch reported that such online message has directly contributed to violent outbreaks, further complicating peace-building initiatives (Human Rights Watch, "Ethiopia: Tigrayans Targeted in Fresh Wave of Ethnic Violence," December 9, 2020).

Disinformation campaigns exacerbate historical grievances and entrench animosities between different ethnic groups (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). By constantly highlighting past conflicts and injustices, these campaigns prevent the wounds of history from healing. They keep ethnic tensions at the forefront of public consciousness, making it difficult for communities to move beyond their historical animosities (Freedom House, 2021). According to the International Crisis Group, social media has played a significant role in keeping historical grievances alive and preventing the establishment of a stable and unified national identity (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Mr. Firesenbet, a Public Relations expert at the MoP, highlighted that the Ministry of Peace is actively engaged in various initiatives to combat false information and hate speech on social media platforms, thereby fostering a peaceful social environment.

The Ministry collaborates with national and international organizations focused on peace, reconciliation, and conflict resolution, ensuring a unified approach to addressing misinformation and promoting peaceful interactions on social media. Additionally, the Ministry encourages and strengthens indigenous conflict resolution and reconciliation systems within communities, empowering local mechanisms for resolving disputes and promoting peace at the grassroots level. Utilizing research-based conflict resolution processes, the Ministry facilitates people-to-people engagement, fostering understanding and dialogue among diverse groups to promote reconciliation and harmony. Furthermore, the Ministry promotes social capital by fostering trust, cooperation, and mutual support among individuals and communities, contributing to a more cohesive society. Through various initiatives, including discussions involving artistic, creative, and motivational speakers, the Ministry also promotes values such as tolerance, empathy, and peace, aiming to inspire positive behaviour and attitudes for the advancement of a culture of peace. Despite these efforts, challenges remain in holding individuals accountable for exacerbating conflicts, as the Ministry lacks the authority to enforce legal action against them. Moving forward, addressing this challenge will be crucial for effectively combating misinformation and promoting peace-building efforts in the digital sphere.

4.4.2. Inclusive Dialogue and Participation

To achieve sustainable peace, it is essential to engage in inclusive dialogue that encompasses all stakeholders, including marginalized groups, civil society organizations, and local communities (Dovidio et al., 2017). By creating platforms that facilitate inclusive participation, the voices of those most affected by the conflict can be heard and considered, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment to the outcomes (Brudholm, 2008).

Mr. Tibebu ENDC's Media, Communication and Outreach Coordinator believes that social media has become the primary platform for expressing opinions and grievances related to conflicts in the country. However, he observes that instead of alleviating tensions, many messages on social media tend to exacerbate conflicts and contribute to a continuous cycle of violence.

According to Mr. Tibebu, people involved in conflicts often resort to social media because they feel unable to resolve their issues through peaceful means with the government or ruling party. He emphasizes the importance of bringing these issues to national dialogue and resolving them through peaceful discussions rather than resorting to force.

Mr. Tibebu also criticizes the way the consultation commission discredits individuals trying to bring their ideas to the table. He mentions that the commission often influences public opinion by echoing misleading information and discrediting the neutrality and independence of the commission itself.

He further highlights that discussing these issues openly and transparently could lead to resolutions. For example, while questions may arise about the commission's neutrality and independence due to its ties to the government and budget allocation, Tibebu argues that these concerns can be addressed through dialogue and understanding of legal procedures.

Mr. Tibebu highlighted the immense potential of digital platforms in ensuring the success of national consultations. He emphasized that public acceptance is crucial for the effectiveness of such consultations, and providing the public with accurate

information is essential in achieving this acceptance. Developing a culture of consultation within the country may take time, but it is a necessary step towards fostering understanding and resolving differences of opinion.

Tibebu noted that every country faces disagreements and disputes, but the manner in which these are resolved varies. While some countries may resort to conflict and war, others, like Ethiopia, prioritize dialogue and peaceful resolution of differences. He stressed the importance of adopting a sustainable approach to consultation, considering Ethiopia's adversarial culture. In this regard, Tibebu suggested that social media platforms should collaborate closely with stakeholders to support the consultation process.

Overall, Tibebu stresses the need for constructive dialogue and communication to address rumours and conflicts effectively, rather than allowing social media to exacerbate tensions and hinder peaceful resolutions.

Despite the importance of inclusive dialogue, social media often complicates peace-building efforts by promoting divisive narratives that polarize communities (Global Network Initiative, 2019). This divisive content fosters an "us vs. them" mentality, making it challenging for conflicting parties to engage in constructive dialogue.

Reports from the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) underscore the detrimental impact of divisive social media content on efforts to foster understanding and cooperation between conflicting groups (PRIO, 2020).

While inclusive dialogue remains crucial for sustainable peace-building, addressing the complications introduced by social media is essential to overcoming polarization and promoting constructive engagement among conflicting parties.

In addition reconciliation efforts must address the widespread atrocities and human rights violations committed during the conflict (Brudholm, 2008). Establishing mechanisms for transitional justice, such as truth and reconciliation commissions, can help acknowledge the suffering of victims, hold perpetrators accountable, and foster a sense of justice and closure (Sobhani & Axinn, 2016). These processes are essential for healing and building a foundation for lasting peace.

4.5. Findings

The analysis underscores the key role of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in shaping narratives surrounding the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022). These platforms have served as key channels for disseminating information and influencing public discourse, thereby significantly impacting international perceptions of the war. One notable aspect highlighted by the findings is the prevalence of ethnically based narratives, with Tigray activists emphasizing instances of ethnic targeting and violence against Tigrayans. On the other hand, Pro Federal Government emphasizes instances of ethnic targeting and violence against the Amhara, while government opposition Oromo activist focuses on instances of ethnic targeting and violence against the Oromo. Such narratives not only reflect deep-seated ethnic tensions but also generate substantial engagement online, indicating the significance of ethnic dynamics in shaping the conflict's narrative landscape.

Furthermore, the analysis delves into the contrasting narratives propagated by the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). While the federal government and its supporters have propagated the narrative that the TPLF is a terrorist group posing a threat to national security. They were arguing that the TPLF collaborates with foreign entities against Ethiopia's interests. On the contrary, TPLF supporters have portrayed the federal government's actions as genocide and aimed at destroying the Tigray ethnic group. They have used social media to highlight alleged atrocities and humanitarian crises.

The findings also explain both sides of the war have accused each other of committing genocide acts. Supporters of the federal government have highlighted massacres in the Amhara and Afar regions, while TPLF supporters have focused on violence and systematic efforts to annihilate the Tigrayans. International organizations like Amnesty International have reported on violence and mass killings in both regions, adding credibility to these claims.

Besides disseminate disinformation both the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) exploited social media to advance their narratives. False reports, exaggerated claims, and manipulated images were widely

circulated, contributing to a significant rise in disinformation. This flood of misleading information created widespread confusion and deepened societal divisions, complicating the public's ability to discern the truth. The deliberate dissemination of disinformation not only fuelled misunderstandings but also made it harder for the international community and local populations to grasp the reality of the war.

Further the war also saw a rampant increase in hate speech targeting specific ethnic groups. Social media platforms were inundated with messages that promoted segregation, distrust, and violence. This widespread use of hate speech exacerbated existing ethnic tensions and posed a serious threat to national unity. The constant barrage of inflammatory content made it difficult to maintain social cohesion, as communities became increasingly polarized and antagonistic towards one another.

The "No More" movement emerges as a significant narrative against foreign intervention in Ethiopia's internal affairs. This campaign, prominently featured on social media, frames the war as part of a broader struggle against neo-colonialism and biased international narratives. Supporters of this movement argue that international media and Western governments have unfairly targeted the Ethiopian government while ignoring or downplaying the actions of the TPLF, gaining and mobilizing support against perceived external interference.

International geopolitical interests, particularly concerning the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), have also been intertwined with the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022). Social media has served as a platform for competing narratives, influencing international diplomatic and policy decisions. The impact of social media activism has been profound, with influencers and activists using platforms to rally support, disseminate their narratives, and organize protests. This digital activism demonstrates how social media can be a powerful tool for both advocacy and manipulation, affecting the course of the war and public perception.

However, challenges persist in coordinating multi-stakeholder responses to hate speech and disinformation have faced significant challenges. The lack of detailed regulations and guidelines has hindered effective coordination among media councils, journalists' associations, religious institutions, and human rights organizations.

Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to establish clear frameworks and cooperative mechanisms. The Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation No. 1185/2020 aims to balance controlling harmful speech and promoting human rights. However, gaps in the Proclamation and its implementation raise concerns about meeting international human rights standards and effectively balancing restrictions with rights. And in an effort to combat the surge in hate speech and disinformation, the Ethiopian government introduced Proclamation No. 1185/2020. .

Furthermore, the media landscape and the role of intermediaries, telecom providers, and social media platforms have significantly influenced the war dynamics. The evolving nature of these roles at the international level presents on-going challenges and opportunities for addressing misinformation and hate speech. A comprehensive approach that includes media literacy and regulatory measures is essential for mitigating the negative impacts of social media on the war.

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, played a significant role in the dissemination of harmful content during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022). Algorithms that prioritize provocative posts inadvertently contributed to the spread of hate speech and incitements to violence. While efforts to improve content moderation have been made, these measures often prove insufficient. The persistent issue underscores the need for more robust and effective regulatory frameworks to manage the spread of harmful content and protect social cohesion.

For these reason the prevalence of hate speech and disinformation during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) has significantly eroded trust and solidarity among different ethnic and social groups in Ethiopia. The resulting atmosphere of distrust has made it challenging for communities to maintain the social bonds crucial for mutual cooperation and support. As trust deteriorates, the social fabric that holds communities together weakens, further destabilizing the country.

And social media has played a pivotal role in undermining national unity and social harmony by promoting divisive messages. The proliferation of hate speech has led to increased polarization and strained relationships between communities. This

disruption of peace has further destabilized the country, making it more difficult to achieve and maintain national unity. The spread of hate speech and disinformation has severely undermined social cohesion in Ethiopia. Divisive narratives have deepened ethnic rifts, making it difficult to rebuild a cohesive society. The challenge of restoring unity and long-term stability is significant, as the entrenched divisions require substantial efforts to overcome.

Peace-building efforts in Ethiopia have been significantly impeded by the spread of disinformation and hate speech on social media. These harmful campaigns incite violence, entrench historical grievances, erode trust, and complicate dialogue. The environment created by such content makes reconciliation difficult, as it continuously reinforces divisions and animosities.

For sustainable peace-building, inclusive dialogue involving all stakeholders is essential. This includes marginalized groups, civil society organizations, and local communities. Ensuring that the voices of those most affected by the war are heard is crucial for addressing the root causes of the war and fostering long-term peace and stability.

So, social media has played a significant role in shaping narratives and undermining social cohesion in the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022). The rapid spread of disinformation and hate speech on these platforms has deepened divisions within Ethiopian society, intensified ethnic tensions, and hindered peace-building efforts. Addressing the challenges posed by social media requires effective regulation, improved content moderation, and enhanced coordination among stakeholders. Failure to address these challenges could have far-reaching consequences for Ethiopia's stability, national unity, and social cohesion.

CHAPTER FIVE

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

The Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022), which began in late 2020, underscores the significant impact that social media can have on social cohesion in times of crisis. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have become integral to how information is disseminated and consumed. While these platforms offer opportunities for communication and mobilization, they also present substantial risks when used to spread disinformation and hate speech. The dual nature of social media's influence has profound implications for social cohesion, intensifying tensions, undermining trust, and complicating efforts toward peace-building.

Social media dynamics during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) disclose both positive and negative impacts. Positively, these platforms allowed for rapid information sharing, connecting communities and facilitating the organization of humanitarian aid. Social media enabled those directly affected by the war to share their experiences, raise awareness about human rights abuses, and draw international attention to the crisis. These actions helped to mobilize global support and resources, providing some relief amid the turmoil.

However, the negative impacts of social media in the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) have been significant. Disinformation and hate speech spread quickly, often outpacing fact-checking and correction efforts. Various actors, including Federal government officials, TPLF leaders & his supporter, opposition groups, religious leaders, activists and individual users, exploited social media to disseminate selective and biased information. This selective reporting often highlighted the suffering of one's own side while downplaying or ignoring atrocities committed by their forces. For instance, pro-TPLF social media accounts frequently focused on federal military actions and alleged atrocities against Tigrayans, while pro-government accounts emphasized TPLF's attacks and alleged human rights abuses. Such one-sided portrayals aimed to bring in sympathy and support, fuelling polarization and deepening societal divisions.

The role of social media platforms and the need for effective regulation have become critical areas of concern. Current content moderation efforts are often insufficient to keep up with the volume and speed of harmful content. There is a pressing need for social media companies to implement stronger content moderation policies, enhance their fact-checking capabilities, and promote digital literacy among users to help them critically evaluate the information they encounter. Transparent and consistent enforcement of platform policies is essential to prevent the spread of disinformation and hate speech, thereby protecting social cohesion.

Addressing these challenges requires multi-stakeholder collaboration. Governments, social media companies, civil society organizations, and international bodies must work together to develop comprehensive strategies to combat the negative impacts of social media. This includes fostering international cooperation to share best practices, supporting local initiatives that promote peace and social cohesion, and advocating for policies that balance freedom of expression with the need to curb harmful content.

The implications of social media on social cohesion and peace-building are profound. Social media can undermine efforts to build trust and promote peaceful coexistence by spreading divisive and inflammatory content. On the other hand, when used responsibly; social media can support peace-building initiatives by providing platforms for dialogue, reconciliation, and the dissemination of accurate information. Ensuring that these platforms are used ethically and responsibly is crucial for addressing the underlying causes of war and fostering long-term stability.

In conclusion, the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) provides valuable lessons on the critical role of social media in contemporary conflicts and its impact on social cohesion. The rapid dissemination of information, both accurate and misleading, has shown the need for effective strategies to manage social media's influence. By implementing strategic recommendations, enhancing collaboration, and promoting advocacy, stakeholders can tie together the positive potential of social media while mitigating its risks. Addressing these challenges is essential not only for resolving during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) impact but also for preventing similar issues in future conflicts in Ethiopia. The path forward requires a concerted effort to

balance the benefits of social media with the need to protect societies from its potential harms, ultimately fostering a more cohesive and peaceful Ethiopian community.

5.2. Recommendations

Enhance Content Moderation: Improve algorithms to swiftly detect and address hate speech, disinformation, and inflammatory content on social media platforms. Increase the number of moderators familiar with Ethiopia's cultural context for more accurate content moderation.

Promote Digital Literacy: Launch nationwide campaigns and integrate digital literacy into school curricula to educate users, especially younger generations, on identifying and reporting disinformation and hate speech.

Implement Clear Regulations: Develop comprehensive laws that balance freedom of expression with preventing harmful content, aligned with international human rights standards. Establish strong enforcement mechanisms, including penalties for non-compliance.

Foster Collaboration: Encourage cooperation among the Ethiopian government, social media companies, civil society groups, and international bodies to combat harmful online content. Promote public-private partnerships to support peace-building initiatives.

Enhance Transparency: Mandate social media platforms to publish regular transparency reports detailing their efforts to combat disinformation and hate speech. Establish independent oversight bodies to monitor and evaluate content moderation practices.

Promote Ethical Use: Develop and share guidelines for ethical social media use, urging users to share information responsibly and counteract harmful content. Engage Ethiopian social media influencers to promote positive narratives.

Strengthen Fact-Checking: Support local fact-checking organizations to verify information rapidly and collaborate with social media platforms to address false information effectively.

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Appendices

Appendix A

I. Guiding Interview questions for the Ethiopian Ministry of Peace

1. How does the Ethiopian Ministry of Peace perceive the role of social media in shaping narratives and discourse during conflicts?
2. Does the ministry have policies, rules, and guidelines to monitor and control social media for peace? What about enforcement mechanisms against those who violate the rules and principles of social media ethics?
3. Particularly during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022), how does the ministry assess the content of disinformation and hate speech spread on social media and its impact on social cohesion?
4. What methods and strategies has the Ethiopian Ministry of Peace implemented to monitor and address disinformation and hate speech on social media during conflicts like the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022)?
5. How does the ministry explain the impact of disinformation and hate speech spread on social media in Ethiopia?
6. What impact does disinformation and hate speech spread on social media have on the ministry's peace-building efforts in Ethiopia?
7. If the Ministry of Peace has strategies to respond to hate speech and disinformation spread on social media, could you elaborate on them?
8. Does the Ministry of Peace collaborate with other stakeholders to prevent disinformation and hate speech on social media platforms and ensure strong social cohesion and peace? If so, how does this collaboration function?
9. What strategies or recommendations does the ministry offer to mitigate the negative impact of social media-driven disinformation and hate speech on social cohesion and peace-building efforts in Ethiopia?
10. Any point you want to add regarding the topic.

II. Interview questions for the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission

1. How does the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission perceive the role of social media in disseminating disinformation and facilitating hate speech during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022)?
2. To what extent has the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission implemented awareness programs aimed at preventing hate speech, as stated in number 8, sub-number 6, of the proclamation issued to prevent and control the spread of hate speech and disinformation? How is the effectiveness of these programs measured?
3. How does the commission monitor disinformation and hate speech on social media platforms in Ethiopia, particularly during conflict situations, and what methodologies does it employ for tracking?
4. What are the implications of the disinformation and hate speech spread through social media during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) on human rights? How does the commission assess its impact on social cohesion?
5. Could the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission elaborate on any strategies it has devised to address hate speech and disinformation propagated through social media?
6. What measures does the commission recommend or support to mitigate the adverse effects of human rights violations resulting from social media-driven disinformation on social cohesion in Ethiopia?
7. How does the commission conduct awareness campaigns to promote human rights principles concerning the use of social media, especially in conflict scenarios such as the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022)?
8. What recommendations does the commission offer to address the challenges posed by human rights violations and threats to social cohesion in Ethiopia propagated by disinformation and hate speech?
9. In what ways can the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission contribute to promoting responsible online behaviour to safeguard human dignity and reinforce social bonds in Ethiopia? Any point you want to add regarding the topic.

III. Interview questions for the Ethiopian Inter-Religious Council

1. How does the Ethiopian Inter-Religious Council perceive the influence of social media in spreading disinformation and hate speech, During the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022) and other conflicts in Ethiopia?
2. Particularly during times of crisis and conflict, what role does social media play in relating and shaping religious narratives and discourses surrounding the conflict?
3. What forms of social media-driven narratives, disinformation, and hate speech influenced Ethiopian religious communities during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022)?
4. How does the religious council evaluate the impact of disinformation and hate speech spread on social media on religious unity, inter-religious relations, and broader social cohesion?
5. How does the Council utilize social media platforms to promote messages of compassion, solidarity, and reconciliation between different faiths, countering divisive narratives and strengthening social cohesion?
6. What role do religious leaders play in addressing the issues of disinformation and hate speech spread on social media within their communities?
7. How can religious leaders effectively leverage social media platforms to amplify voices of peace, enhance social cohesion, and counter harmful narratives that promote division?
8. How does the Religious Council collaborate with other stakeholders to mitigate the negative impact of social media on religious unity and social cohesion in Ethiopia?
9. What opportunities exist for interfaith cooperation and dialogue on social media platforms to foster mutual understanding and joint action for peace and reconciliation in Ethiopia?
10. Any point you want to add regarding the topic.

IV. Interview questions for the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission

1. How does the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission view social media's role in spreading disinformation and hate speech during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022)?
2. How do social media-driven false narratives, misinformation, and hate speech affect national dialogue, particularly in conflict-ridden regions like Tigray?
3. How does the Commission evaluate social media's impact on fostering or hindering meaningful dialogue and understanding among different ethnic, religious, and political groups in Ethiopia?
4. What steps does the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission take to address challenges to national unity caused by disinformation and hate speech on social media?
5. How does the Commission collaborate with stakeholders to promote constructive dialogue and prevent divisive narratives on social media?
6. How does the Commission utilize social media platforms to amplify peace advocates' voices and spread reconciliation messages among Ethiopian communities?
7. Based on your expertise, what recommendations do you propose to mitigate the negative impact of disinformation and hate speech on social media in Ethiopia?
8. How can the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission encourage responsible online discourse and cultivate a culture of constructive dialogue in Ethiopia?
9. Any point you want to add regarding the topic.

V. Interview questions for the Ethiopian Media Authority

1. How does the Ethiopian Media Authority perceive the role of social media in shaping narratives and discourses during conflicts?
2. Can you provide insights into the results of the reports prepared by organizations providing social media services, as per the proclamation issued in 2020 to prevent and control the spread of hate speech and disinformation? How are these results measured?
3. How many awareness programs has the authority developed to prevent the spread of disinformation and hate speech? What have been the outcomes of these initiatives, and have there been any encountered challenges?
4. Could you elaborate on the coordination efforts involved in preventing and controlling the spread of hate speech and disinformation? Additionally, what are the existing gaps in this coordination?
5. What are the primary challenges in preventing and controlling the spread of hate speech and disinformation, according to the authority's perspective? How does the authority define these terms?
6. Are there any factors hindering the appropriate enforcement of rules and principles of social media ethics? If so, could you provide an explanation?
7. Particularly during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022), what types of disinformation and hate speech were prevalent on social media? How does the authority assess their impact on social cohesion? Could you provide specific examples if available?
8. If the authority believes that hate speech and disinformation on social media in Ethiopia impact social interactions, what measures does it recommend or support to mitigate these negative effects?
9. How can the Ethiopian Media Authority contribute to promoting responsible online behaviour to uphold professional media practices in Ethiopia and strengthen social bonds within the community? If there are any additional ideas or perspectives related to the subject matter, please feel free to share them.

Key Informant Interviewee (KII)

The Participants of the KII includes:

The informant	Name of the institution	Date of Interview	Location of interview
Mr. Firesenbet Bersuerga	Ministry of Peace (MoP)	April 18, 2024	Addis Ababa
Mr. Tibebu Hailu	Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRsC)	March 28, 2024	Addis Ababa
Mr. Tibebu Tadesse	Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC)	March 27, 2024	Addis Ababa
Haji Mesud Adem	Ethiopian Inter-Religious Council (EIRC)	April 8, 2024	Addis Ababa
Mr. Tamrat Dejene	Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA)	May 10, 2024	Addis Ababa

Influential Social Media Users

Government Leadership & Supporters Name	Number of Followers (Twitter/Facebook)	TPLF Leadership & Supporters Name	Number of Followers M= Million K= Thousand
Mr. Temesgen Tiruneh	527/252K	Tedros Adhanom (Dr.)	2M/1.3M
Deacon Daniel Kibret	282K/283.6K	Mr. Getachew Reda	420K/283.3K
Ms. Hermela Aregawi	484K/154K	Mr. Stalin Gebreslase	205.5K/282K
Mr. Mesay Mekonen	239K/220K	Mr. Alula Solomon	101.2K/309,6K
Mr. Dejen Assefa	97.7K/126.9K	Mr. Kassa Hailemariam	48.6K/212K
Mr. Suleiman Abdella	424K/109K	Tsegaye Ararsa (Dr.)	51.5K/113K

Appendix B

To evaluate and analyse the impact of social media on social cohesion, particularly regarding disinformation and hate speech during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022), the researcher conducted a review of the following relevant materials.

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<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-64225270>
- BBC (25 March 2021) Tigray Conflict: The Fake UN Diplomat and Other Misleading Stories <https://www.bbc.com/news/56456535>
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<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55295650>
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<https://www.facebook.com/etvworld1/videos/453426486167959>
- EHRC-OHCHR (12 Oct. 2024) EHRC-OHCHR Joint Investigation Report on Tigray Conflict
<https://ehrc.org/download/ehrc-ohchr-joint-investigation-report-on-tigray-conflict/>
- Ewunet. (2022). Alula solomon hate For Ethiopia Speech
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61b8gnzLW8o>
- Fitz-Gerald, A. M., & Segal, H. (19 Apr. 2021). Ethiopia: A New Proxy Battle space? <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/ethiopia-new-proxy-battlespace>
- Human Rights Watch. (2021). Ethiopia: Unlawful Shelling of Tigray Urban Areas. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/11/ethiopia-unlawful-shelling-tigray-urban-areas>

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Declaration

This thesis, titled, "**Impact of Social Media on Social Cohesion: Disinformation and Hate Speech during the Ethiopian civil war (2020-2022)**," represents a new contribution on my part. All information used in the thesis is appropriately cited, and it has not been submitted for a degree at any other institution.

Declared by:

Name of the student: _____

Signature: _____

Date of submission: _____

Approved by:

With my endorsement as a university adviser, this work has been submitted to Addis Ababa University's Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) for examination.

Name of Advisor: _____

Signature: _____

Date of submission: _____