



A Study of News Stories' Identification, Selection and Processing: The Case of  
Private Newspapers in Ethiopia

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **A Study of News Stories' Identification, Selection and Processing: The Case of Private Newspapers in Ethiopia**

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**Addis Ababa University, 2014.**

This study examines how reporters and editors of the private newspapers regularly produce content as well as how they interact with each other and their sources and government authorities. The study was informed by gatekeeping theoretical framework within the overarching rubric of political economy approach.

Furthermore, the study employed a qualitative method where interview was used as a data collecting tool. To that end, two sets of interview questions were set for reporters and editors. The study considered all established private newspapers published in the country.

The findings reveal that reporter-editor interactions started with story proposals and end with the final printing or rejection of a story. The private newspapers under the study used very differing approaches to or uses of editorial meetings as well as different practices regarding the need for reporters to be present in the office, some having extreme control and others somewhat loose, or even too loose control to the extent that some reporters may not even show up for days.

It was found out that story editing also varied widely, ranging from mere reading and making minor language corrections to an intense process requiring more interviews and possible rewriting.

The study also reveals that bad composition was a more important reason than lack of information for editors' rejection of stories, and that calls from authorities served as an important factor deterring the reporting some news.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

When *The Guardian* newspaper of the UK was first published on May 5, 1821, its front page was populated with a lot of badly made advertising materials and no single news items on it (Franklin, 2008). Writing of that first issue, Franklin (2008) said, “There are no headlines, no lead story, no variation in the size of font to signal the news salience of stories.” That was then. Today not only *The Guardian* but also very many newspapers worldwide appear in print and online carrying a lot of news, feature, opinion and other pieces.

Newspapers in Ethiopia carry news, feature and opinion articles, although the same could not be said for every one of them. The stories come in different ways, including tips for people wishing to see an issue covered, and sources of the newspapers and press releases. Specialization is not very common and well developed; but generally speaking, there are business, political and general type stories displayed on newsstands.

Speaking from experience, many reporters learn the job more by doing it, learning where and how to get stories and how to select items relevant for their particular publications, more from their colleagues and friends. This happens when more experienced reporters pass stories to them and their bosses send them on an assignment, sometimes with an advice on how to cover their stories. Often, both the mentors and the mentee might not have any education in journalism.

Ethiopia may be unique in certain ways as regards the nature of its media. One is that there are very few daily newspapers – three to be specific, and only one of these is privately owned. The magazines are mostly monthly, with some being weekly. A

casual observation of most of these publications shows that news has secondary value; most try to make a sale on the weight of the opinion or entertainment articles they carry.

There are essentially three origins for a story (Keat, 2013). These are naturally occurring events such as disasters, earthquakes, fires and airline crashes that are inherently unpredictable; created or subsidized news, which are more frequent and occur because a person, group or organization either does something public and newsworthy and/or seeks press attention; and, third, enterprise news, made when journalists act rather than react as they do in disaster or tragedy. It is called enterprise news because the editor or reporter takes the initiative on a story. Such stories develop from beat coverage and investigative journalism (Keat, July 2013).

These stories may be divided into two general types: one that comes as tips or using the reporters' (newspaper's) sources, and others that come in the form of press releases – each with its own challenges and benefits. In the case of the former, decisions could be more easily made, while the reporter may face the challenge of finding people that are willing to talk. In the case of the latter, there is the issue of institutional relationship, which could be affected if the press release is not published. Speaking from experience, there are institutions that believe that their press releases are to be published without much change to their content, while some newspapers do not feel obliged to do so.

Stories are subjected to go into various processes before they come out as published products. The whole process of how those stories eventually make it to the pages of a newspaper while some other stories get lost along the way, and the relationships that factor into the decision making process are not always straight forward.

## **1.1. Statement of the Problem**

The Ethiopian media industry could have some broad categories in the manner it deals with news. There are some that do not at all carry any news item, but focus mainly on opinion and satire pieces. There are also those who carry some news on their front pages, with some of them continued on inside pages. There are also those, both in state and private ownership, which strive for predominantly news content with varying degree of success. News can be selected and expressed in a variety of ways by a range of different news tellers (Harrison, 2005).

Media houses and their journalists go about finding, selecting and developing stories in various ways. Some depend mainly on tips that come from outside in the form of invitations and press releases. In such circumstances, some journalists are merely expected to show up in the office to get their assignments from their editors. In other places, it could mainly be the role of the reporter to get the news.

A study on UK newspapers indicates that when news coverage was analyzed, findings revealed that

30 per cent of published items were wholly dependent on agency copy with a further 19 per cent strongly derivative from agency materials. In a further 13 per cent of stories, agency copy was evident along with information from other sources, while 8 per cent of items used 'mainly other information', and in a further 5 per cent, the wire service reported the story but the copy was not used in the newspaper report; in 25 per cent of stories there was no evidence of dependence on agency copy. In summary, approximately half (49%) of news stories published in the quality press and analyzed for this study were wholly or mainly dependent on materials produced and distributed by wire services with a further fifth (21%) of stories containing some element of agency copy (Franklin, 2008).

It is also the case that the Ethiopian media environment has a significant number of journalists (including gatekeepers) with little or no formal journalism education.

There are graduates in language and literature, business and economics, law, sociology, psychology, engineering and other fields that are involved in journalism. The job is as open for these diverse graduates as it is for journalism graduates, and most learn the job by doing it, shaped and influenced by gatekeepers who probably are not educated in journalism. This diversity of professionals could push different experiences, values and knowledge into the editorial room. The idea of which story is newsworthy is not just the job of the reporter; however, it is collective work of the media organization (Eden, 2011).

According to Harrison (2005), opinions about what is news vary in accordance with who is discussing it, and the discussion could take place at common-sense level, the practitioner level and the academic level. All these levels could come together in the “melee” that is the newsroom, affecting the content that goes out to the public.

As the enterprise is based on conventions rather than rules, the processes and outputs are often bound to vary across media houses. How such process work in various media houses in the Ethiopian context is not well studied yet. This study is an attempt to find out how newspapers in the Ethiopian context go about finding news and feature stories and how the gatekeepers eventually decide which to publish and on which page, or how the stories are ranked in the order of their importance in a particular newspaper. The study also aims at exploring any differences in this regard in state and private media, i.e., how differently private and state media go about finding and treating stories and how ownership influences news selection.

## **1.2. Objectives of the Study**

There are two categories of objectives for this study: general and specific objectives.

### **1.2.1. General Objective**

The general objective of the study is to investigate how news and feature stories are identified, selected, sourced, processed and published in newspapers.

### **1.2.2. Specific Objectives**

The specific objectives of the study are the following:

- To find out how the selected private newspapers determine newsworthiness.
- To examine how the selected private newspapers go about finding stories (news and feature).
- To identify the internal and external factors (politico-economic factors) that influence the story production process in the selected private newspapers.
- To find out how journalists find and interact with sources to get stories

### **1.3. The Research Questions**

The study sets out to answer the following research questions:

- How do the selected private newspapers determine the newsworthiness of a story?
- How do the selected private newspapers go about finding stories (news and feature)?
- What are the internal and external factors (politico-economic factors) that influence the story production process in the selected private newspapers?
- How do journalists find and interact with sources to get stories?

#### **1.4. Significance of the Study**

Independent media in the post-1990 Ethiopia started out in the wrong footing, without any rules or guidelines and with few people of experience setting up newspapers. It was a disturbed environment with all kinds of people writing all kinds of things, real or imagined, ethical or otherwise. To this day news journalism remains is still in its infancy and the sector remains dominated by people without any journalism training or background.

As such each newsroom environment is a playground or battleground shaped by people who in turn are largely shaped by their experiences. That environment and how it produces the content that people buy and read has been little study. This research could shed light on that territory and open the doors for more interests in the field by showing the kinds of people and the interactions that make up the dynamics of news production. It could encourage the media institutions themselves as well as researchers, academic institutions, the government and other stakeholders to take measures that could prepare a fertile ground for its development.

#### **1.5. Scope of the Study**

This study has covered all the major private newspapers, all of which are based in Addis Ababa. It has relied on an open-ended interview targeting reporters and editors at various levels, although a list of questions had been drafted one for reporters and one for editors – although some of the editors would be asked the questions posed to reporters, as some of them are also engaged in content production. A couple of people that were only briefly employed as journalists were asked a few questions to get an idea of what the perception of such people is, as there are many the come and go fast.

## **Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature**

This chapter pays particular attention to reviewing extant literature related to the area of investigation

### **1.1. An Overview of the History of Newspaper**

Looking at the very long history of the newspaper, the changes that it has been undergoing since the eighteenth century and, more lately, the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are happening so fast and determining its form, content and ownership in radical ways. While the interest of this humble piece of research is to examine how newspapers in Ethiopia go about selecting and processing news, it is of interest to go through the history and the evolution of news through time, beginning with the earliest material that could arguably be considered as a “newspaper” in terms of providing current information.

The discussion begins with a working definition of what a newspaper is. Hanna Barker and Simon Burrows (2004, p. 4) give a working definition that considers the content, timing, and availability as follows:

Newspapers are printed publications that appear frequently, at regular intervals, in dated (or numbered) instalments, containing a miscellaneous variety of stories per issue in a consistent and recognisable format. They should be available to the general public, usually for sale individually or by subscription, and attempt to provide readers with a regular diet of the most up-to-date news available. Nevertheless, for practical purposes, what constitutes a newspaper varies according to context. By the mid-eighteenth century, daily newspapers were available in some European countries, but elsewhere bi-weekly, weekly, fortnightly or even monthly political periodicals still functioned as the primary news media.

Max Weber (as cited in Tuchman, 1991) goes further and recognises newspapers as political organizations which “function” as political clubs, based on the argument that news was not mere information and that journalists were not mere purveyors of

information or scandal but professional politicians.

What has always been interesting about news and newspapers is how the newspapers find and process their news items, how the end stories we read in the printed newspaper or its online version come about. It is true that those materials that we see published are the survivors from the editorial room, in case of the availability of excess stories, or they have to undergo various manipulations to develop a decent news look in case of news shortage. It is, thus, important to look at what news is, in the first place, before delving into how it is handled.

Paper and Sue Featherstone (2005) list what “news” means to a number of authors and working journalists. For one it is something that binds people together in a sense of community. Another defines it as something you have to tell a friend before the credits on your mobile phone run out. Yet another view is that news has to be something surprising, something we didn’t already know, that will either affect the readers directly or, as in the case of a human interest story, inspire their empathy or interest, or if you walk into a pub with some information and get everyone’s attention, then you have news in your hands.

The news goes beyond the delivery of what might have occurred into a deeper discussion and analysis of it. According to Roass Eaman (2009), news is not primarily about constructing reality but rather is mainly concerned with facilitating communication about reality. Once they have answered the basic “who, what, when, and where” questions, most news stories shift their focus from what happened to what different people think has happened—and especially why it happened. They also begin to consider its significance, but again through the opinions and judgments of others.

Considering the natural quest of humans for information and the early development of literature, the development of “news” and “newspapers” could be considered as a natural development. But this history has some major landmarks, which occurred at a good distance from each other both in time and space so much so that one cannot trace a relationship of the earlier leading to the development of the latter.

The first historical landmark in that regard is the *Acta Diurna*. It meant “Daily Events”, a handwritten newsheet published by “the government”. *Acta Diurna* is the “earliest known newsheet ...which began in Rome in 59 B.C. It reported the proceedings of the Roman Senate and such news as births and deaths” (Gordon, Rich, 2010). The Roman government posted this newsheet in public places for all to read.

With just this little bit of information about this newsheet, one can see that its topics are still substances that feature in today’s papers. Parliaments, senates, congresses – the name may vary, but what the people with seats in these places make the decisions that impact the lives of many or all of their compatriots and even the world. For that reason and more, the media find them of particular interest to this date.

Deaths and births are also of interest, particularly those of royal and celebrity origins. In some countries death and funeral ads also occupy space in newspaper pages. Like the *Acta Diurna*, Gordon (2010) writes that “The first newspapers were probably handwritten newsheets that governments posted in public places” (*Ibid.*).

From 59BC Rome, history fast-forwards to 700AD China, when and where the world's first printed newspaper, a Chinese circular called *Dibao (Ti-pao)*, started appearing (Stewart, 2010). This “newspaper” should probably be called “news block” as it was printed on carved wooden blocks.

Almost as long as it took from the hand written *Acta Diurna* to the printed (even if on wood) Dibao, and from Rome to China, at the same time, so did it take for the next phase. In 1609, the newspaper would get one of its most important features – regular publishing – with the introduction of *Avisa Relation der Zeitung*, the first regularly published newspaper (*Ibid.*) That is also around the time newspapers began to evolve much more rapidly both in form, content and technologically, becoming more or less like we know them today as enterprising individuals take it upon themselves either to provide business information, take on established regimes or engage each other in stiff competition.

That evolution in its more modern sense started in the mid-sixteenth century, with the Venetian *Gazzette*, which was handwritten, and was given credit as the one from which the first “newspapers” evolved. The format, which the Gazette used, was so influential that it would remain commonplace for over two centuries (Barker, 2004, p.5.)

After that there would be the *Avisa Relation der Zeitung*, later followed by *corantos*, which were produced by Dutch printers in Dutch, English and French from around 1620. Then the first daily newspaper appeared in Leipzig, Germany, in 1650 – the *Einkommen de Zeitung*; England, France and the United States would follow in 1702, 1777 and 1783 (*Ibid.*).

But the United States was not that late in having newspapers. *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick*, published by Benjamin Harris in 1690, would appear only once, after which the colonial government banned it. The *Boston News-Letter* became the first to appear regularly in 1704, and after 60 years, there would be more than 20 newspapers in the colonies, and by 1830 more than 1,000. Nearly 80 years

on, in 1909, there were 2,600 dailies and 14,000 weeklies in the United States (Stewart, 2010).

The first half of the nineteenth century would see the emergence of the penny press and later on the creation of the Associated Press. The latter years of the century and early twentieth century saw the emergence of the Yellow Press with such big names as William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, publisher of the *New York Journal* and *The World*, respectively. A new development, or landmark, in the history of journalism then was the creation of newspaper chains. A publisher called Edward Wyllis Scripps founded or bought more than 30 papers from 1893 to 1926. Following suite, Hearst also built a chain and owned 25 newspapers by 1937 (Gordon, 2010).

The early years of the twentieth century saw the introduction of broadcast journalism. It would be a busy century where communication technology would develop rapidly and journalism would be impacted profoundly by its products, which included the television and the Internet.

## **2.2. Development of Content**

According to (Scholz and Kaiser, 2008, p.3),

The first study devoted to newspapers came from a German court secretary, the widely traveled Kaspar Stieler. In his book entitled *Zeitungs Lust und Nutz* (1695) Stieler went so far as to compare newspapers to the Bible: both texts teach their readers about places and events; both are sources of revelation; both chronicle the way of the world in all its grand and small details, and, finally, both address all those who were able to read.

In a dramatic occurrence in August 1835, Benjamin H. Day, publisher of the first major penny press newspaper, *The New York Sun*, published a series of articles about the discovery of life on the moon by one Sir John Herschel, who had an observatory in

South Africa. The series of articles, complete with in-depth analysis, told of vegetation and some kind of creature that roamed the surface of earth's satellite, and each article ended with a teaser that brought the reader back for the next article. Day published the articles so persistently, drawing hoards of readers, that, eventually even those newspapers that had resisted publishing the outrageous claims of discovery eventually succumbed. "In the end, they could suffer the humiliation no longer. Day's articles began to appear one by one in the pages of his competitors' papers. But the final humiliation would come when Day revealed that not one of the tales of life on the moon was true" (Spencer, 2007, p. 27).

In modern days, there have been the cases of such "award winning" journalists as *Washington Post's* Janet Cooke, whose celebrated editor, Bob Woodward, was not able to notice or develop enough suspicion that her article, which she wrote and got published in 1981, about an eight year-old drug addict was totally fabricated. She got the Pulitzer Prize and lost it upon discovery (Iggers, 1999, p. 12). There was also the case of a Chinese journalist, Chen Yongzhou, working for Xinhua, who wrote entirely false reports several times in the course of a year, damaging the reputation and financial standing of a company (CNN, 2013.).

Outrageous or otherwise the history of newspaper is replete with similar accounts of fictitious stories appearing as true. Nevertheless, from the earliest newsheet to the latest online newspaper, there has been focus on providing some kind of information the readers could find of interest.

The newspaper was borne out of the need of the society. "While sharing new information with others in one's social surroundings is a common and everyday

human activity, it needed a social role that ascertains truth and distinguishes *intelligence from gossip*” (Allan, 2010, p. 39).

The author in *The Rutledge Companion to News and Journalism*, Wolfgang Donsbach, Professor of Communication at Dresden University of Technology, tries to rationalize how this societal role developed in early nineteenth century in the United States.

The individualization of society and the loosening of traditional familial structures were part of a growing mobility that itself was caused by industrialization. The citizens in this new society asked for neutral and valuable information to cope with their changing environments – e.g. to know where the jobs and the markets are and who runs for office. This demand for a new quality of information stimulated a more neutral and factual reporting and eventually led to the professional norm of “objective journalism” and to the division of labour between reporters, editors, and commentators. “The revolution led to the triumph of the news over the editorial and facts over opinion, a change which was shaped by the expansion of democracy and the market, and which would lead, in time, to the journalist’s uneasy allegiance to objectivity”. Thus, probably the most important reason for the existence of journalism is a professional service whose unique selling proposition is the validation of assertions about reality with a high degree of responsibility (Allan, 2010, p. 4).

Experiences of the past few decades show, nevertheless, that this societal role that was found to be a necessity two centuries ago is now in question as “Public access to the vast and growing reservoir of on-line material challenges the role of traditional news media” (Seib, 2004, p. 17).

The *Acta Diurna* delivered to the public mainly such content as the activities of the Roman senate and the courts as well some news on certain births and deaths (Harrison, 2006). Harrison also gives account of pamphlets and news books that informed readers about battles and other important events in early sixteenth century;

there were also “walking newsmen” around the same time in major European cities that gave news in exchange for payment.

Day, whose *New York Sun* “reported” about life on moon, would find content for his newspaper in the “seamy side of life” and crime. He needed more reporters to cover the police courts so that he did not miss any stories and “treated his readers to a continual parade of petty thieves, hookers, confidence artists, homeless transients, and a host of others who had shadowy connections on the wrong side of the law (Spencer, 2007, p. 25).

The content that the penny press of Yellow Journalism days was, according to Spencer, “any form of anarchy that existed in the city’s streets and neighbourhoods,” anything that “the Lord let happen” – “a hurly-burly, headlong plunge into a nether world inhabited by crooks, murderers, petty thieves, and numerous persons whose names regularly appeared on police blotters (*Ibid*).

A year after Day had published his fictitious moon articles, another publisher, James Gordon Bennet, publisher of the *Herald* would go into a series of serious investigative articles regarding the murder of a prostitute of poor background, setting journalism history, albeit focusing on one of the favourite subjects cherished by the yellow press (Spencer, 2007, p. 32).

The yellow press under such big names as Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst and much of journalism afterwards, ironically, owes a lot to Day, despite him making up weird stories. Spencer writes that although Day was probably not conscious of the fact at the time, his obsession with covering police stories likely

marked the first instance in American journalism when the craft of reporting and storytelling actually began, even if he got his cue from the *London Morning Herald*.

The content that the yellow press provided dealt with the lives of the lowly in society, and it fed on the influx of thousands of largely poor and struggling immigrants to New York both from rural areas and Europe. The penny press, which had become affordable to such readers, “became the laboratory in which journalistic experimentation took place. A sense of competition started to take hold, with editors and publishers fighting it out to see who could be first to report stories of significance” (*Ibid*, p. 25).

In the mess of this competition, the *New York Times* would be born with its founder, Adolph S. Ochs, promising to “All the News That’s Fit to Print,” and pledging “to give the news impartially without fear or favor, regardless of party, sect, or interest involved” (Spencer, 2007, p. xii).

While journalism may have developed in several aspects, much of the debate over the kind of content that is provided by newspapers remains even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as the trial of American actress Wynona Ryder over allegations of shoplifting gaining bigger significance than, say, the war in Iraq (Seib, 2004, p. 2).

The media have a role to play in informing the audience strongly enough to enable them make decisions. When the media has failed in that, consequences could be grave. In a book that covered the weak interest of American media in covering international affairs, Seib (2004) writes that news media consistently doing their job will provide the public with an ever-growing reservoir of fact and opinion which they

can use to make decisions about the need for war, as well as about other policy matters.

“In 2003, that was not the case. The U.S. news media’s prolonged weak performance in covering the world left the public under-informed, and America went to war amid circumstances that merited closer scrutiny,” he wrote (Seib, 2004, p. 2).

If newspapers in the 17<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries shamelessly copied content from each other, sought to report on the seamy side of life, published government documents in full and unedited and even made up stories, Seib accuses 21<sup>st</sup> century American reporting, particularly in world affairs, as parochial “as if the politics and culture of a news organization’s home country were all that matter.” News organizations reduce their international coverage because of lack of initiative and money; then they conduct surveys among audiences that are already inadequately informed, and use that finding to further cut back on their international coverage (Seib, 2004, p. 2).

Garner (as cited in Franklin, 2006), in an article titled “Hungry media need fast food”, sees content emanating from the duty of the media to “deliver information after proper scrutiny” in order to serve the right of the citizens to know. He also sees this content being determined by a complex interplay between “politicians, particularly those in government” that manipulate the media, and the media that manipulates the politicians as well as powerful third party, known as the public relations industry.

Contributing to the objectivity of an objectivity media practice, one can always see a lot of interests coming into play in the process of the production of content as well as after the publication of it in the form of various reactions, which may go from benign appreciation and criticism to litigations in the courtroom.

### 2.3. Source of Content

The story of the rise and fall of newspapers, for those that believe so, might have been ironically told through the life and death of *News of the World* newspaper, a UK paper that was killed in 2011 after 168 years in business amidst public outcry over the manner it found sources for its pages. The revelation of the newspaper's practice of hacking phones for information "added even greater momentum to public as well as scholarly concerns about the future of journalism. "Hackgate" – *as how it had come to be known* - possessed the essential ingredients of a strong tabloid story; celebrities, sex, the royal family, phone hacking, bribery, blackmail, crime and corruption." Rupert Murdoch, the paper's owner, would later say that it was the most humbling day of his life (Franklin, 2012, p. 664).

While this act highlighted the decadence in the "newspaper business," sourcing content for newspapers has its own long story and ups and downs, which continues to this day. In the late eighteenth century, modern reporting practices were still in their infancy and staff correspondents virtually unknown. Nor were there any specialist agencies collecting and circulating news (Barker, 2004, p. 6).

In those days newspapers copied from each other "shamelessly." Sources in early newspapers included foreign newspapers and hand-written newsletters, up-to-date information from private and mercantile correspondence, books and printed ephemera, travelers' and merchants' reports, coffee-house gossip and other oral sources, most of which were not reliable. By the mid-eighteenth century, there were official publications including government gazettes, and gradually newspapers were getting their own material and analysis. Some had started sending their own staff or

using paid correspondents to foreign lands to cover events, such as the French Revolution (*Ibid*, p. 7).

Certainly, there are a lot more international correspondents today covering the world, although Seib argues that international events are rather poorly covered, leaving the audience poorly informed and unable to make appropriate decisions.

According to Gans (2004, p. xix), “Source power, audience power, and efficiency remain the major explanations of why the news comes out as it does.” The audience power is shown in the increasing number of soft news; efficiency also has higher priority because of the pursuit of the audience and the profit motive. “Still, without reliable sources, the steady and easily obtained supply of political news on which the national news media depend would not be available” (Gans, 2004, p. xix).

#### **2.4. Impact of Newspapers and Technology**

A June 2008 report by the House of Lords Select Committee on Communication of the United Kingdom on the impact of media ownership on the news reads: “The news media have a vital role in a democracy. They report the news from home and overseas; they expose injustice; they challenge government and officialdom and they set out a huge range of views” (House of Lords, UK, 2008). That role is seen in the impact of the media all over the world in small and large scale. A democratic process can hardly be considered without a free and informative press. Among its massive impacts in American history include the Watergate scandal, which brought down the administration of Richard Nixon and the exposure of Enron’s accounting irregularities (Gentzkow, Glaeser, and Goldin, 2004).

For centuries the growth of newspapers has gone in tandem with technological innovations. The *Acta Diurna* and other similar newsheets required that the reader go where they were posted in a public place. *Di-bao* was an ungainly newspaper printed on blocks of wood. Hand written sheets could not be made in large enough copies to reach the majority. The development of the printing press, including improvement from horse-ran engines to steam engines, suddenly sparked off a revolution with masses getting access to the news at affordable process. They came Samuel Morse and the telegraph, enabling news to be dispatched across a great distance at a very short time; and the radio, television and the Internet and its online media (including online newspapers) made access to news instant and encouraged quicker updates.

Harrison writes that the relationship that news has had with technology has therefore had particular consequences for its character. “Printing allowed identical stories to be reproduced many times and to be disseminated among a greater number of readers; simultaneity of reading the news was uncoupled from the spatial condition of common locality, and the dissociation of ‘here’ and ‘now’ is very relevant to the way in which the news developed and was consumed, (Harrison, 2006).

Wherever the press laws were liberal or where controls on the press broke down “the press had an explosive potential”. Among the distinctively subversive impacts of newspapers are politicization of the public, shaping and directing revolutionary fervor, fomenting unrest. Where absolutist press regimes were in place, newspapers also challenged authority implicitly (Barker, 2004).

The spread of the newspaper had meant that anyone that can read, or listen to content being read, was informed, albeit with the same version of story, causing Marshal MacLuhan’s comment of homogenization of news (Harrison, 2006).

The boundaries would be pushed even farther with the advent of better technologies, seemingly to threaten the newspaper, which, apparently seems to catch up. Today news organizations are benefiting from the magical powers of technological gadgetry, and they are all striving to provide news updates in real time. Seib (2004, p. 3) writes, “These improvements in gathering and delivering news allow journalists to report from places where timely coverage used to be almost impossible. This should mean that there will be fewer invisible wars and fewer forgotten peoples.” Seib’s lucid insight into the reach of the media today shows the distance news journalism has travelled through the ages reaching a point of what would have been an unimaginable communication even compared to a few decades earlier.

## **2.5. The Journalist**

At the heart of all the narration we have seen so far is the journalist. In today’s context these journalists could be very well supported with a host of technological gadgets that help them get, process and deliver their stories from wherever they are. Or the journalist could be a robot, processing routine news items, as is now under experiment in a number of newspapers in the US.

If *Acta Diurna* was the first newsheet or if *Avisa Relation der Zeitung* was the first regularly published newspaper, who was the first journalist? Spencer (2007) writes that America’s first journalist was not the kind that would inspire confidence in the society. He served time in prison for not paying his debts, and he made money selling elixirs for maladies both short term and terminal. This probably belied the man’s intense desire to prosper, as he would go on and promote his newspaper, which would be the first in America as a publication of *Publick Occurences Both Domestick and Foreign* (Spencer, 2007).

Historians paint a sad and bad image of early journalists as people who were not far from the bottom of the social ladder; were underpaid and constantly looking for work; drank too much, and were rude and ruthless and fundamentally dishonest. “They struggled through long and exhausting hours of labor and lived in hovels on the wrong side of the tracks, often having only the local saloon as a place of comfort” (Spencer, 2007, p. 97).

Those Yellow Journalism day journalists withheld their identities and did not hesitate to get their information in deceptive ways. Being dishonest was considered as a sure way to success, Spencer wrote. Looking at what happened at News of the World more than a hundred years later, one can argue that at least some entertained the same belief even today. When Spencer writes that those early journalists lied, took bribes, stole pictures and documents from competitors, he could as well be writing of today.

During the first half of the eighteenth century, professional news writers in England, Scotland, France and Germany went from coffee house to coffee house and from criminal court to government offices gathering and disseminating news, which they used to write on newsletters (Harrison, 2006). Today’s journalist still has to go around looking for news and work with in a strict deadline, with in which the news will have been identified, selected and processed. Gans (2004) writes that as long as official sources have the authority and resources to deliver newsworthy statements and events, journalists will depend on them and the result will be top-down news. Journalists continue to be primarily messengers who mainly simplify and dramatize what their sources say and do. In line with that, despite claim of objectivity by news organizations and journalists’ aim for fairness and detachment in reporting the news, Gans (2004) says that the same journalists also remain stubbornly ignorant about

ideology and the ways it shapes the public officials who currently make so much of the national news and who persistently pursue their objectives, play hardball politics, and refuse to compromise; they also do not see how much their own professional values constitute an ideology.

With most news being about government and politics, Gans (Allan, 2010) writes in another book that he sees four most important roles for the journalist: as messenger to the political elites, messenger for the citizenry, disaster messengers and watch dogs. And journalists need to have certain competencies in order to deliver what is expected of them, with journalism considered as a profession. Writing in the same book, Wolfgang Donsbach (Allan, 2010) lists the following competencies:

- (1) possess a keen awareness of relevant history, current affairs, and analytical thinking,
- (2) have expertise in the specific subjects about which he or she reports,
- (3) have a scientifically based knowledge about the communication process,
- (4) have mastered journalistic skills, and
- (5) conduct himself or herself within the norms of professional ethics.

Donsbach sums up these competency areas arguing that journalists need the broader, intellectual perspective that enables them to make sound news decisions in order to assess the salience of events and issues and to connect knowledge to context; they also need to analytically challenge the veracity of information or news sources and to understand the behaviour patterns and motivations of people, for they, like scholars, formulate knowledge by knitting facts to contexts.

Sometimes working journalists become so good at most of the required competencies and adequately realize the criteria used by their editors that they could entirely fabricate their stories, like Janet Cooke did with the *Washington Post*. There are

personal experiences in Ethiopia as well where reporters imagined the quotes they used in their stories, including the names and positions of the subjects they claimed to have interviewed. Cooke and the local reporters say they have done that because of the pressure they have from their bosses. Part of Woodward's answer after his newspaper had discovered that it had published a false article was that "I believed it, we published it. ... It is a brilliant story—fake and fraud that it is" (Wikipedia, 2014.).

## **2.6. Government Control & Its Impact on Content**

Gordon (2010) writes that early newsheets, such as the *Acta Diurna*, were believed to be government owned, and they were posted in public places; much later in time, when many newspapers were privately owned, governments wanted to regulate them. Until 1695, England required license for newspapers, although such requirement by governments did not go without criticism during that century; several other countries stopped requiring license in the 18th century and the heavy taxes levied by governments which wanted to make newspaper publishing difficult for the owners were also lifted (Gordon, 2010.). Despite regulations becoming lax, relatively, in England, Gordon (2010) writes that the British parliament had tried to impose tax on colonial papers, but that law was repealed in just one year, during which the newspapers had simply ignored it.

Historically the United Kingdom, France and the Netherlands practised different types of control on the emerging press. The pressures included licensing regulations, prior censorship, restrictive privileges, patronage rewards, political subsidy, bribery and fees to publish or suppress items, as well as draconian libel and sedition laws. "Prior to the ratification of the First Amendment in the United States in 1791, no country in

the Western world granted their citizens freedom of printed expression as a basic right. Even when it was granted it proved a precarious liberty” (Barker, 2004, p. 8).

Late into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, governments started developing new ways of news management, such as restricting access to newspapers and taxing knowledge (Barker 2004). Barker (2004) writes that in late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, governments of the so-called free world would still practice various ways to manipulate the media into carrying the kind of news they (the governments) wanted.

Gans (2004) writes that the Bush administration had relentlessly pressured journalists to get its way with the national news media and that the White House forced the journalists to dispense its news. Likewise, the Pentagon, during the first Iraq war, supplied the news directly to the journalists denying them access to the combat zone, or just embedded the journalists it hand-picked (Gans, 2004).

Seib (2004) discusses the idea of patriotism becoming an influence on how journalists cover or are expected to cover the news, particularly during a war – or, stretching that a little further to fit current Ethiopian context, the construction of the Grand Renaissance Dam (GERD). The adjective “American” takes precedence, Seib writes, asking if the journalists should be loyal primarily to the American government or the American public. “Popular emotion during wartime can discourage telling politically unsettling truths. ... Even during a brief war, the government will instinctively cover up or fuzz facts, sometimes for security reasons and often for political ones. Wartime requires special resolve on the part of journalists to not be pushed around, tempered by the recognition that operational security may occasionally require complicity with government secrecy,” (Seib, 2004).

## 2.7. Making the News

Herbert J Gans (2004) spent months observing journalists at work in a number of news media. In *Deciding What's News*, the book that resulted, he wrote that he viewed news “as information which is transmitted from sources to audiences, with journalists- who are both employees of bureaucratic commercial organizations and members of a profession-summarizing, refining, and altering what becomes available to them from sources in order to make the information suitable for their audiences” (Gans, 2004, p. 80).

He saw the news as reports of “the actions and statements of those claiming to represent nation and, to a lesser extent, society, thus constantly reminding us of the reality and power of these constructs” (Ibid, p. 298.). Gans (Ibid, p. XVII) saw journalists as dependent on official sources and most of the national news as White House propaganda.

Jackie Harrison (2006) differed in emphasis from this view, with an argument that the news was fundamentally about truth. She saw news as “an orientation towards truth through truthful accounts of contemporary events” with such core values as Accuracy, Sincerity, Location Space/Place (here), and Contemporaneousness Time (now). According to Harrison (2006, p.2, 3), “These four core values combine to define the news in terms of its practical manifestation and social and cultural features.”

Reading between the lines and taking the liberty to put together what Gans and Harrison said, an attempt to define news could be made as reports of the actions of others as truthfully as possible with the help of particular guiding values.

Harrison (2006, p. 18) adds, however, that “Attempts to define news often ‘tend to dissolve into lists of news making events’, which explain the criteria of newsworthiness via the properties inherent in any selected event,” and dissolves into a simplistic definition that “news is what is judged to be newsworthy by journalists, who exercise their news sense within the constraints of the news organizations within which they operate.”

“News organizations should encourage questions about the official version of events and should provide an ample supply of information that news consumers can use to make up their minds about what they think their country should do,” writes Seib and goes on to suggest questions to be asked to gauge the news organization’s performance:

- Are news organizations looking beyond the government’s priorities and covering matters that policy makers neglect?
- Does news coverage provide the public with the information needed to evaluate government’s performance in a timely way or does it lag behind events and scrutinize policy only after decisions have been made and full-blown crises are under way?
- Is the full range of technology-enhanced news venues—from print to Web— being used to provide the public a broad spectrum of information?

The answers to these and related questions are grounded in fundamental principles of journalism and reflect recent developments in the science of delivering the news, (Seib, 2004, p. 2,3).

But who makes news and how? News is generally produced by journalism professionals (of which there are different types with different journalistic subcultures, for example, reporters, producers, technical staff and managerial staff) working in a routine day-to-day manner within a news organization (Harrison, 2006).

Gans (2004) sees a whole lot of people involving in the production process, dividing the news organization into functional positions, which describe different roles in the process of story selection and production. From his observations of various news organizations, he says that there are the story suggesters, coming first in line. Then there are the story selectors, those who make the assignments, and the reporters, writers and researchers, as well as camera crew. The story suggesters include the reporters, their editors, as well as non-journalist staff.

“The task of the story suggesters is facilitated by the wire services, which spin out stories twenty-four hours a day. These then become story suggestions for follow-up by magazine or television reporters” (Gans 2004). Equally important, Gans continues, story suggesters can rely on the continuing availability of "anticipated stories," identifiable events prescheduled by sources, such as news conferences, speeches, congressional hearings, and ceremonies, which are frequently called media events because some come into being principally to be covered by the news media.”

Top editors in consultation with the reporters, writers, and others who have enough advance information about the potential story make the story selection. After that and after the assignment has been made, one of the journalists, usually an associate producer or writer, becomes a story designer, drafting an outline the major themes of the story and listing the questions which reporters must ask – this could also be done by the editors when they make the story selection. The assignees then begin their work, with what they do constantly reviewed by their bosses, (Gans, 2004).

This process of journalists passing information from sources to audiences seems linear, says Gans, but it actually is a circular process, with a large number of feedback loops. “For example, sources cannot provide information until they make contact with

a member of a news organization; and that organization will choose the sources it considers suitable for the audience, even as it is chosen by sources who want to transmit information to the audience. Sources are also an important part of the audience, particularly in Washington. The audience is, moreover, not only an information recipient but a source of income for the news firm; and insofar as its allegiance must be maintained, its viewing and reading behavior even affects, to some extent, the choice of sources by journalists. In effect, then, sources, journalists, and audiences coexist in a system, although it is closer to being a tug of war than a functionally interrelated organism,” (Gans, 2004, p. 81).

While more or less people in similar positions interact with each other in the process of the production of news, “the news values of different news organizations differ.”

Harrison (2004, p. 104, 105) elaborates this as follows:

News selection and presentation is adapted according to the designated style of each organization and represents only one way of doing the job. To put it another way, reporting style is not universal. Or, as a journalist puts it, the journalistic culture which exists in a newsroom ‘sets what editors and their executives regard as a good story or dismiss as “boring” and determines the subjects they think of as “sexy” and those that are not’; it also ‘creates the moral atmosphere of a paper [or broadcast newsroom]’. On any ‘normal’ newsday not dominated by a major story, it is evident that a variety of priorities exist in different news organizations which result in different judgments about what is newsworthy.

Harrison quotes several authors with different views about who influences the final news product the most. For one it is a tug of war between sources and consumers and for another it is the advertisers. One puts it largely on consumers, another on owners and yet another on large corporate investors. For critical theorists, the interests of media owners and ruling capitalist elites coincide and, as a result, they see the news media as an instrument for perpetuating an unwelcomed capitalism. There are others

that argue that the journalists are free enough to control and shape the news independently of any ideological rectitude, which is supported by claims among some journalists that they find the spin exercised by politicians difficult to resist. This last claim is challenged by those authors who argue that that news media organizations and their journalists are not value neutral and may be political players in their own right (Harrison, 2004).

## **2.8. Values in the News**

No matter how hard journalists try to be objective, says Gans (2004), they cannot be value free. But “the values in the news are rarely explicit and must be found between the lines-in what actors and activities are reported or ignored, and in how they are described.” These values are not deliberately placed in the news, so what values are in them depends on who is making the inference. Even so, there are so many values in the news that it is virtually impossible to identify them, (Gans, 2004).

Gans’ (2004) enduring values in news are the following:

- Ethnocentrism: holding ones own nation above all. In foreign news, this shows itself by judging other countries by the extent to which they live according to ones (Eg, American) values
- Altruistic democracy: implication that politics should follow a course based on the public interest and public service.
- Responsible capitalism: an optimistic faith that in the good society, businessmen and women will compete with each other in order to create increased prosperity for all, but that they will refrain from unreasonable profits and gross exploitation of workers or customers.
- Small-town pastoralism: favouring small towns over other types of settlement.
- Individualism: the preservation of the freedom of the individual against the encroachments of nation and society
- Moderatism: discouraging excess or extremism; for example, atheists, religious fanatics, hippies are considered extreme
- Social order & national leadership: the desirability of social

order and the need for national leadership in maintaining that order.

These are values which Gans has generated from his observation of the news media.

## **2.9. Theoretical Framework**

This study intends to explore the entirety of the process involved before we see a news item published. This process involves getting news idea that would be proposed, having that idea accepted, processing the idea into a story, getting the story approved/accepted and having it printed.

This study would address the issue from the theoretical lens of gatekeeping. Within framework, it would also consider the concept of news values, which is important in eventually getting the kind of news that is deemed fit to print. A brief overview of both the gatekeeping theory and the concept of news values is provided below.

In the preceding section, news values as stipulated by Gans (2004) have been discussed. There are also other, more popular, lists that have been developed over the years. These values came out of an examination of published news. Norwegian academicians John Galtung and Marie Ruge developed the first list of 12 values half a century ago. Later a freelance journalist turned lecturer at the University of Sheffield, Tony Harcup, worked with a colleague, Deirdre O'Neill picking the values in thousands of front page stories of three national newspapers and concluded that news stories must generally conform to one or more of 10 values which they identified, (Pape & Featherstone, 2005).

The following are the ten values they identified:

- (1) **The power elite:** powerful individuals, organizations or institutions.
- (2) **Celebrity:** people who are already famous.
- (3) **Entertainment:** sex, show business, human interest, animals, an unfolding drama or offering opportunities for humorous treatment, entertaining photographs or witty headlines.
- (4) **Surprise:** an element of surprise or contrast.
- (5) **Bad news:** negative overtones, such as conflict or tragedy.
- (6) **Good news:** positive overtones, such as rescues or cures.
- (7) **Magnitude:** sufficiently significant, either in terms of the number of people involved or their potential impact.
- (8) **Relevance:** issues, groups and nations perceived to be relevant to the audience.
- (9) **Follow-ups:** subjects already in the news.
- (10) **Newspaper's agenda:** stories that set or fit the news organizations own agenda.

The Encyclopedia of Journalism has a shorter list of six upon which it says most professional and academic authors agree. These are: conflict (struggles featuring people, governments, or social and natural forces), impact (the number of people affected and how much they are affected), proximity (geographic or demographic closeness to the reader, listener, or viewer), timeliness (the more recent, the more newsworthy), prominence (how widely known a person or event is on the local, regional or national and international levels), and novelty (unique or bizarre people and events), (Sterling, 2009).

This research will attempt to look at how values feature into the selection and processing of stories at private newspapers in Ethiopia.

**2.9.1. Gatekeeping:** This is almost redundant to use along with news values, since most of the gatekeepers' influence is achieved through an implicit or explicit understanding of the news values embraced by the media house and/or its journalists, but in such as it is related to the relationship between reporters and editors, with a product between them, it is important to discuss. "What is it that makes one news story sufficiently interesting or important that it passes through an editorial "gate" to

the next step (gate) in the process— perhaps eventually to reach the pages of the newspaper, and thus its readers? The relevant decision factors could be similar across different editors at different papers—or broadcast news departments, for that matter—or they could vary widely in application” (Sterling, 2009).

It is interesting that, whereas an institution may have a set of values that it implicitly or explicitly embraces, it is the gatekeepers who are entrusted with the task of putting them into practice, consciously or otherwise. It will be interesting to see who these gatekeepers are, or, as Sterling’s *the Encyclopedia of Journalism* (2009) puts it: who the gatekeepers are, how they came by that role, what training and biases they bring to the role, how much decision making freedom they have, and the breadth of their potential impact—do their gatekeeping decisions affect only one local daily, or *The New York Times* where any news story decision will contribute to the news agenda for other media (Sterling, 2009).

“Gatekeeping is the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day, and it is the center of the media’s role in modern public life” (Shoemaker, 2009, p. 1). Shoemaker and Vos write that while there is a huge load of information about numerous events which require to be transformed into “a manageable subset”, the work of dealing with that has come down into an established process that “determines not only which information is selected, but also what the content and nature of messages, such as news, will be” (Shoemaker, 2009).

This process is known as gatekeeping, a term whose passage to media is very interesting as not only was it coined by a psychologist but also it was used to describe

how the decision of various “gatekeepers.” particularly a housewife or a maid, influences the variety of food items to be presented at the dinner table.

“What started with Germanémigré Kurt Lewin’s experiments to entice Iowa women to eat more beef (hearts, livers, kidneys, and other secondary cuts of meat) as a patriotic duty during World War II (Rogers, 1994) has evolved into numerous models and hundreds of studies of media gatekeepers andgatekeeping – and into contemporary study of whether the Internet has turned solid “gates”into little more than screen doors” (Roberts, 2005, p. 2).

What Roberts describes as the weakness of Gatekeeping Theory is what actually makes it relevant for this paper on news gathering and processing. It is a descriptive theory, with little or no predictive power, summarizing the various forces involved in the decision making process to select messages to present to the audience (Roberts, 2005, p. 2).

American media has demonstrated instances of both extremes of the gatekeeping business in two different but consecutive administrations: the strength of its application, as seen during the invasion of Iraq, under the presidency of one of the worst American presidents, according to some opinion polls, and the absence of it during the sex scandal involving Bill Clinton and Monica Lewnisky – similar polls crediting Clinton as one the best presidents.

Shoemaker and Vos (2009) wrote, quoting Boehlert (2006) that “when the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, few journalists from the mainstream American news media questioned their country’s actions. Those who did were reprimanded as unpatriotic by the government, as well as by audience members, and some lost their

jobs. With few exceptions, the news organizations fell into line and conveyed the news from reporters ‘embedded’ with troops in the field” (Shoemaker, 2009, p. 1).

The media would behave quite differently during the earlier Clinton Administration, when the president was caught up in what could have been a more personal affair that hardly affected the wellbeing or security of his people. The floodgates of media coverage were wide open, eventually leading to the impeachment of one of the better presidents of the United States. Williams and Delli Carpini argue that this was because a change in the American media environment with the subsequent breakdown of gatekeeping. “The media environment in the United States has changed dramatically in the last 15 years, with the expansion of cable and satellite television, the growth of the internet and world wide web, the horizontal and vertical integration of the media through conglomerates, the general availability of VCRs and remote television controls, and so forth. The new media environment is distinctive in several ways: the increased volume of information that is available; the increased speed with which information can be gathered, retrieved and transmitted; the increased control given to consumers of the media; the fragmentation of media audiences and the resulting greater ability to target media messages to particular audiences; the greater decentralization of certain aspects of the media; and the greater interactive capacity between consumers and producers of media messages (Abramson et al., 1988; Katz, 1997)” (Williams, 2000, p. 65).

While the above two affairs are very different, it still leaves an interesting question why the diversification of media and collapse of gatekeeping that nearly destroyed Bill Clinton in earlier years did not apply when George W. Bush, ironically, “nearly destroyed” (these words, my own) Iraq at a great cost to his country and others. This

paper will try to shed some light on the considerations reporters and their editors make in the process of developing the content that is regularly published for the consumption of the audience.

## Chapter 3: Research Methodology

**3.1. Research Design.** The study employed a qualitative method. As the study is a descriptive research, the data were collected in such a way that they could describe how news stories were produced in Ethiopian private newspapers. Gaye Tuchman, Professor of Sociology at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, USA, (1991) writes:

It is not so surprising that the most significant work on news is qualitative. Theoretically the most interesting questions about news and news organizations concern either process, such as the general relationship between news and ideology, or the specific processes by which news reproduces or alters ideology. And when one considers the impact of news on either individuals or institutions, the best answers are also process-oriented and require examination of either micro-interactions, such as how people read the newspaper or watch television news, or the course of unfolding events.

The study mainly focused on the process that finally resulted in the newspaper copies that are made available to the audience in the market. It tried to look at how the power hierarchies in the newsroom played and interacted to determine the final product in terms of the content produced by the staff.

The paper has attempted to explore how the journalists and their editors found tips and how they developed and edited those stories to the satisfaction of the house, as well as to understand the role of each person and the proportion of work they put into the work.

This research has used the interview method for an in-depth discussion of the news production process from beginning to end. Several questions were prepared in advance to guide the interview, but there were more questions than on the list. (See appendices One and Two for list of questions drafted for reporters and editors, respectively.)

While the interview method enabled respondents to speak their mind from their point of view, allowing them to share their experiences and points of view without any restriction, a kind of balance was managed for critical consideration because both reporters and editors were included in this research.

**3.2. Data Sources.** This research focused on private newspapers based in Addis Ababa: *Addis Admas*, *Capital*, *Fortune*, *The Reporter* (Amharic & English editions), and *Sendeq* newspapers. One reporter that worked with two newspapers that are no longer in print, *Sub Saharan Informer* and *Neway Street*, was also included. These newspapers have been selected mainly because they are the major privately owned newspapers that give greater emphasis to news coverage. In this regard, they also consider themselves as each other's main competitors.

A total of 17 journalists have been interviewed for this research so as to get better insight into how Ethiopian private newspapers would find and process stories they would eventually publish. A total of 14 journalists and one ex-journalist have been interviewed; two more were included but with much fewer questions, because they stayed on the job only briefly, moving on to other fields of profession. The ex-journalists have been included at the researcher's discretion, because of her experience with an Amharic and an English newspaper, both of which are no longer in print. One interview has been rejected because of what the researcher thought were largely irrelevant answers, which did not shed any light or give any insight for this paper. This interviewee, who has been on the job for a few years, answered via email, and later declined to communicate for further interview.

The researcher has also included his personal observations and experiences, as he has been in the media for a long time and currently holding a key, albeit informal, editorial position at a major newspaper.

**3.3. Sampling Procedure:** There are not that many newspapers that appear regularly, hence most were included in this research purposely. The editors that edited news and feature stories were included as well as the staff that mainly worked in the production of news and feature stories.

## **Chapter 4: Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion**

This chapter attempts to present, analyse and discuss the outcome of the interviews conducted with several reporters and editors as well as one owner/managing editor. Six newspapers, including three in Amharic and three in English, have been covered by these interviews, with extensive discussions with willing and available reporters and editors.

### **4.1. Educational Background and Professional Background**

Most of the journalists considered in this study have degrees in a host of fields including literature, linguistics, accounting, economics, law and social anthropology. Only four among those interviewed have first degrees in journalism, and all of them are reporters.

Journalism education being relatively new in Ethiopia, particularly at first and second-degree level, it could be assumed that a good share of past and present journalists never studied journalism: this could hypothetically be explained by a few factors – there are few newspapers, most rely on a small size of human resource, staff of most of the newspapers considered here have been relatively stable at editorial positions, creating little vacancy. Explanations aside, it is the same elsewhere, at least in the experience of the US, where Medsger looked at the recipients of the Knight Fellowships going back 40 years and found the same result.

Likewise, the respondents for this research also made transitions to journalism from other fields. There was a businessman, a promoter of a reggae band, teachers, a laboratory technician, college teachers, and law practitioners.

It has been an age-old debate whether journalism is a profession or not, and if one needed to be particularly trained in the field to become a journalist. An outstanding example in Ethiopia for this debate might be the late Pawlos Gnogno, who only had a fourth grade education but managed to make a name for himself both as journalist and a history enthusiast with a number of books to his name.

A former reporter for the *Washington Post* and now head of the Department of Journalism at San Francisco University, Medsger (2002) wrote in an essay that she had found that more than half of the best journalists in America did not have journalism education. These included 59% of those with Pulitzer Prizes for print journalism and 75% of those with DuPont Awards for broadcast journalism, America's two most important recognitions for journalists. She also found that 58% of those with Nieman Fellowships and 51% with Knight Fellowships were also without journalism education.

This is not to support Medsger's claim "that people who do not study journalism are often better journalists," but rather to show that people who have not studied journalism have still managed to make up a significant portion of the media human resource, as is the case in Ethiopia, where, as a matter of fact, some do not even have more than a high school education, making up for the rest with their own personal efforts and short trainings.

This mix of education and profession has not been without its pros and cons. On the downside, it has meant that most of the journalists had to learn the profession the hard way, while some had an idea of what exactly they had to do because of their journalism education or, in one case, experience with high school mini-media. All the media considered in this research hardly give any training to their new recruits ahead

of sending them out on assignments. Many had to struggle to tell the difference between “news” and “feature”. While the employers claimed that pressure was lax on new recruits, the recruits in some of the newspapers differed, adding that the pressure on them was stronger because no one paid attention to them, while they were expected to deliver what was assigned to them.

One media house infrequently shares documents, which the staff could use to improve themselves, but that is not coupled with any kind of follow-up to check if they have in anyway benefited from it.

This seems in line with the experience in the US, where the Bureau of Labour Statistics reports that reporters, correspondents and broadcast news analysts, received no on-the-job training (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014-15).

The new recruits learned through practice, observation and feedback. For many this is a slow process, during which time they lost faith in the profession, as week after week they failed to deliver or delivered such materials that caused the ire of their editors, leading them to give up hope and in some cases resign or be fired. This proved a vicious cycle in an instance where one of the newspapers had started an in-house training, only to stop it shortly afterwards, as the editors believed that they were training people that would leave the job after a short duration. From personal observation, there have been instances where graduates of other fields such as law, have been recruited for low-level editorial positions without any prior experience in journalism and without any system in place to actively coach them, which led to boredom and eventual resignation, because the recruits have not been actively engaged.

For those who stayed on the job long enough, however, the training on how to write news came slowly but surely. As one reporter put it:

It was ingrained in us over and over again to include background and analysis and maintain accuracy by including the voices of as many stakeholders as possible. The media house I worked for did not like it when we included long quotes by stakeholders; presented a press release or a report without making any alterations or quoted data verbatim. Instead our editors insisted that we analyzed the data, picked an interesting angle and presented it to the readers in an easily understandable manner. Also we were told to keep the lead short and simple. And each paragraph that followed should be an expansion on the lead (should tie back to the lead.) That was viewed by the editors as a big problem with the stories we reporters turned in, (Personal interview, August 20, 2014).

The positive side of the mix is that the new recruits come with knowledge and experiences that are significant input not only to particular stories but also to the media house in general. The most common is among law graduates who offer informal legal advises and interpretations and economics graduates being able to handle economic reports and data.

Wolfgang Donsbach (Allan, 2010, p. 45) writes that journalists “formulate knowledge by knitting facts to contexts”; the broader, intellectual perspective, he says, helps them to make sound news decisions in order to assess the salience of events and issues.

#### **4.2. Definition of News and Selection Criteria**

To begin with, the word “news” implies the presence of a journalism professional “working in a routine day-to-day manner within a news organization” (Harrison, 2006, p. 99).

Values were at the heart of the definitions given by those journalists considered in this research. These values reflected what news meant to the respondents as they learned

from their experiences. Most of the interviewees had no ready-made answer, which they could say right away. Their answers, however, had reference to similar descriptive value-related words such as *unique, bizarre, new, interesting, useful, timely, controversial, catchy, credible, relevant* and *knowledge*. Piecing together the more or less similar definitions provided by the various respondents one gets the idea that what is perceived as news is a new, unique, odd and interesting incident that is timely, credible, catchy and useful to the readers.

Some definitions were also metaphorical, looking at such factors as issues becoming news only when a journalist finds them and from then on those issues making an impact once they are published. For example, Wudineh Zenebe of the *Reporter*, understands the news he reports as “a coiled snake that lay dormant until he found it” (Personal interview, May 20, 2014). This snake is a living and potentially dangerous reptile waiting for somebody to disturb it, so it could attack.

Theoretical details on the subject aside, metaphors are instruments of language and thought that use one idea to give a succinct summary description of another idea. This conceptual metaphor takes the idea of a poisonous snake. This poisonous snake is not moving around, so not everybody is seeing it. It takes someone to find it and release it into the world to bite not randomly but only those it should. This is an ingenious example. The news would not be news if, unlike the snake that was coiled up in hiding somewhere, it was common knowledge. And would it be news if it did not have any impact once out in the public?

So for those who see news as something, which they had to find by investigating, it was another way of describing the metaphor, partially, with both implying that the journalist needs to actually unearth the news from where it is hiding. More or less

related to this is the definition of news given by the respondents as a process of “knowing and letting know”.

A recent case making the news in Canada took actually several decades to do so, and it took investigation and actually looking underground to turn it into a story. Sixty years ago a man killed a young man, who tried to intervene while he was sexually assaulting his own daughter, and two other young men who had come looking for the victim. The father denied and nobody reported any missing persons, so case closed, although his daughter never gave up seeking justice ever since.

After all those years, it took an experienced journalist, Paul Hunter of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, to believe in her story and commence an investigation that included hiring a professional who operated a Ground Penetrating Radar device (GPR) to find what looked like the remains of three people at the exact spot where the woman said the boys were buried. The story stopped there, leaving the rest to the police, which may lead to more news if further revelations are to come (Poynter.org, 2014).

The coiled snake, the investigation, the knowing-and-letting-know, as well as other features in the value-laden definition of news show themselves in Hunter’s story. But this is a story that begged to be covered for nearly 60 years, and it remained dormant but alive, because the girl that claimed assault by her father waited looking for someone to believe in her story, eventually asking for a journalist.

Here we have a journalist who wants to look into a woman’s story which even the police had decided not to accept as a worthy case for many, many years. The woman talked to her parish priest who talked to a journalist who passed the story on to Hunter, who, according to the first journalist, Al Tompkins, is “one of the best

journalists I know. Hunter is at home in war zones and earthquake debris. He travels the world reporting on the biggest stories and the worst of human misery. And yet, even in the worst situations, I have always noticed his reporting reveals a heart that has not hardened” (Tompkins, Sep 29, 2014.). This description indicates why Tompkins not only believed that Hunter had the ability to do the job, but also the heart to decide that it would be a story he would have to do.

Tamirat Gebregiorgis, the managing editor of *Fortune* newspaper, says, “The judgement of what is news and what is not is shaped by the individual journalist’s experience, the platform (print, digital or broadcast), and the specific nature of the newspaper (news media)” (Personal interview, June 7, 2014). His deputy, Hailu Wondium, adds that what is news “also changed with time and as economies changed, with what was once newsworthy becoming more commonplace and irrelevant as news later on” (Personal interview, June 9, 2014).

An example for such argument included the fact that most construction works taking place are now hardly deemed newsworthy. There was a time when the construction of even three and four-storey buildings made the news in Ethiopia. Now even those that are 10-storeys or more hardly make the news. Both the reporters and their editors believe that such constructions are so common place that they no longer make the news unless they are much taller or have some other issue that could make them newsworthy.

That, apparently, has led to the construction sector, as well as many other areas, largely failing to make the news, even when the number of the “ignored” type of buildings is reshaping the skyline of Addis Ababa and other towns.

### 4.3. Editorial Meetings & News Selection

**The Meeting:** Probably a peculiarity of Ethiopian newspapers is that nearly all are weekly newspapers, with a “luxury” of time, for editors and reporters sit together and review the past week and plan the week at hand. Some include designers and sales team in their meetings for various reasons.

While this may not be just a case for Ethiopia, this is used to bring to attention that major international media with large staff only have the editors meeting to decide what the newspaper will look like. This could also be the reason why reporters in large international newspapers often follow the pattern and direction laid out for them according to strict ideological or political lines, while in Ethiopia reporters have larger freedom to find what news they want to work on, and often unfettered by their editors.

All newspapers, but one, included in these interviews, have at least one formal editorial meeting. The *Reporter* newspaper stands apart here in that its editorial meetings deal with two Amharic language editions, appearing on Sunday and Wednesday, and an English edition appearing on Saturday. *Fortune* and *Capital* newspapers have planning, progress and wrap-up meetings on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, respectively, although they could have one less or one more meeting depending on circumstances.

In some newspapers design and marketing heads also took part in the meetings. The argument is that the design heads will have an idea of what they will be doing during the week, and the marketing heads could contribute tips for stories.

Most newspapers hold their meetings for less than half a day, from less than two hours to about four. For some it is an important ritual, with owners drawing

satisfaction in a drawn out meeting that could last the whole day, with a break between the review meeting and the planning, during which time the reporters call around to find tips. All use these meetings to review their performance of the past week and, except for one newspaper, to plan the week ahead.

The one newspaper that does not use the editorial meeting for planning does so because it has proved to be “not suitable” for work. The plans almost always failed. The editor attributes part of the failure to the fact that information aged very fast, particularly for the news features. The editor-in-chief said that those disappointments discouraged their reporters, as the editor would have to ask them why they failed. This newspaper conducts its editorial meetings informally – on the corridor when the editor and the reporters run across each other, and the reporters inform the editor what stories they are working on (Personal interview, August 26, 2014).

With different roles from the editors and with varying lengths, editorial meetings are where the reporters and editors, and occasionally other staff, too, get together to determine what will be news and what will not to their audiences. The review meetings at some of the responding newspapers include examination of own work as well as other newspapers considered to be part of the competition.

These editorial meetings are different from the ones which Gans described, where only editors meet to discuss and set the content for the next edition, including identifying stories that need to be assigned. According to Gans (2004, p. 88), in the print and broadcast media houses he addressed in his study, story suggesters hand their suggestions over to story selectors, a group of people including top producers, top editors and senior editors. They make the final decision about which stories will be covered and assignments will be made to reporters, writers and researchers.

**Story Selection:** Among the Ethiopian newspapers, the stories (excluding invitations for media coverage) come mostly from the reporters, and they are almost always approved dutifully. The reporters have their own “story suggesters” based on whose information the reporters make their own selection. In most places the reporters have significant role in determining not only the kind of stories they do but also the number.

This could be seen as a kind of dividing line. The editors’ decision in determining what their newspapers will look like is more “retroactive”, something that will happen when the story is handed over for editing, and the editor, based on personal skills, perceptions and knowledge, rather than institutional bias, adds to and cut the story as well as change or modify the angle.

The story selection process is one that is loosely related with any strict guidelines or news policies that may be available in the media houses. Many reporters hardly need more than a perfunctory approval from their editors, with rare rejections, mostly because someone might have covered the subject earlier. Most discussion are more like information exchanges, with colleagues, both reporters and editors alike, telling the reporter making the story proposal to cover some news what elements to add, who to talk to and what background info to check.

During these editorial meetings, mostly the reporters come up with their own suggestions. While there are no dedicated “suggesters”, there are also story suggestions coming for discussion and assignment at these meetings.

**Competition:** The Ethiopian media are also aware of the impact of the social media as well as each other’s web presence: the former could compete with them in breaking news, no matter how poorly, and the web presence creates an opportunity for them to

beat each other, as well as the social media, in the competition to reach the audience first.

Both Harrison and Gans write of the effects of such media advances, without referring to any of the social media. Harrison (2006, p. 10) writes of “customized news” and “growing level of interactivity”: these two factors show how significant the need of the audience is becoming in news selection. She adds that “news audiences are now accessing a range of ‘news’ sources, beyond those traditionally provided by the mainstream media, perhaps challenging news professionals’ definition of news. Gans (2004, p. 88) writes that the news media want to be up-to-date and always find the time to discuss newer stories as they emerge outside of their regular meetings, adding “story selection is therefore an ongoing process, ending only when top editors and producers make the final choices”.

As all other media, the local newspapers also feel the pressure from those circumstances where the public gets information first on the social media, and where the newspapers feel to be “no longer the custodians of information”; so for some it is important to try to compete “by giving meaning and context, which the social media cannot do” (Personal interview, Tamirat Gebregiorgis, June 7, 2014).

**The Discussion:** The proposal and the discussion that follows at most places are just formality. For the editors it is that the reporters are experienced enough and that they have worked together for long, which makes much engagement unnecessary. One editor said, “Our reporters are all experienced, and we have worked together for long. We know each other well” (Personal interview, May 25, 2014). A reporter working under this editor also said, “We are all senior reporters. We all know what we are doing.”

For some reporters there is the feeling that they know better than their editors who, they feel, give them inadequate input. A reporter said, “If I could, I would change the news perception of my editors,” (Personal interview, May 20, 2014). Or it may be that there are too few journalists at times of human resource shortage for an extended meeting “to make sense”.

“We have a thick line between editors and reporters,” one editor said, adding that reporters were supposed to complete their own works. Once stories are submitted to him, often he only has to change a few words. In some such places, some reporters say they may not discuss their stories with the editors unless they faced some “extreme cases”.

The subjective nature of the gatekeeping process responds to reporter-editor relationship, in which, largely, the editors are dependent on the proposals from the reporters, and still do not find themselves more equipped to contribute more significantly to the proposals, particularly where the reporters have worked for a long time. “I have not done much reporting personally, which I consider a handicap. I often rely on the proposals from reporters and from a few other suggestions that come on their own” (Personal interview, June 9, 2014).

So with varying degrees of interactions and, for some, with other publications in mind, the editorial meetings approve and reject proposals, and they make decisions about stories that will be too old by the time they go to press and hence breaking them on their websites, and social media such as twitter and facebook.

Various respondents, including reporters and editors, gave various criteria that helped them to determine what was news, although most were similar to those given in defining “news”. These included “benefit to the public both economically and

politically” (Personal interview, August 28, 2014), new and “if I tell it before others do” (Personal Interview, May 20, 2014), “policy issue, importance of the person involved, importance of the issue (housing, transport, power, infrastructure, etc), and amount of money involved (Personal interview, May 22, 2014). “Number one is the issue. Then it must be worth doing in terms of the money, people involved, and it must be fully breaking – we approve it if it has that” (Personal interview, June 9, 2014).

**Reasons to approve or reject:** While the chances are high that most of the stories proposed by the reporters will see the light of day, again mostly with slight editing, it happens that rejection is also not uncommon. Some of those reasons are not at all related to the way the stories have been produced, but to the possible impact they will have.

In recent years, writes Gans (2004, p. 246), taste considerations have expanded to include taboos on religious, racial, and sexual stereotypes. The news media have long been careful to eschew anti-Semitic stereotypes because Jewish organizations have monitored them closely, but other stereotypes were not excised until the news media were criticized for being racist and sexist.

One editor made his decision to reject or not based on how long it would take to edit or if the authorities have made a call to the office. “Often the one reason for rejection is language; if it is so badly written and will take me long to edit, and if there is no time, I will drop it. Otherwise, if the story lacks detail, we try to make up for it and use it; we do not reject it. Or if it is a story that we have been told no to do, and if the other staff have made the decision during a meeting which I have missed, even if the story is completed, I will drop it. Some times we get calls from the police about some

issues we do not have to cover. Mostly about the Moslem protest – they had alleged that we are funded by them” (Personal interview, May 22, 2014.).

This editor detailed this external pressure as follows: Self censorship is encouraged because you get call from security apparatuses, police and INSA, asking you how sure you are about your story. Then also they avoid inviting you to press events for an extended period, the Government Communications, for example, when they are disappointed with you, if you criticise the export performance, if you criticize the GTP. During elections, they could challenge you saying you give increased coverage to opposition parties” (Personal interview, May 22, 2014).

Different editors expressed apprehension towards covering religious and ethnic issues. One editor also preferred not to publish stories that are culturally immoral or that would harm private businesses, unless holding that story affected someone else (Personal interview, May 22, 2014). Another editor (Personal interview, August 26, 2014) said, “If we have to cover religious or ethnic clashes at a university or somewhere, it is highly likely that we will skirt the real cause of the clash.”

Nearly all reporters have most of their stories approved easily, with most editors saying that their reporters have been on the job for long enough to know how to handle the material with little help from their editors. There is an expressed belief in most of the publications that reporters are able to identify newsworthy materials, the issues that are important for the news, and to write and deliver a story that needs only a little work from the editor.

“Every story has value. Usually we have no criteria to drop stories. Every story is information, if one person does not like it, another will” (Personal Interview, May 22,

2014). But stories could wait for the next issue. “Some stories we postpone for the next issue – with care, because another newspaper could carry that story. We rarely reject stories.” (Personal Interview, May 25, 2014). One editor-in-chief looked at the issue of rejecting stories from the point of the bad feeling to could create on the reporters. “I do not throw into the basket, I do not want to discourage the reporters – so usually the reporters are happy,” he said (Personal interview, August 28, 2014). The above editor is satisfied with the stories his reporters get him, so it is only enough for him to know what they are working on, which could happen on the phone or when they meet in the office by chance. “Often I get complete stories. So no worry if I do not meet them. Rarely do I need to interact with the reporters to get complete stories.” Another editor faced enormous pressure from other editors with a responsibility to assure the mandatory 40% content, forcing him to release stories that he would rather reject or hold. This is caused by the pressure of too little content available.

As Harrison (2006, p. 10) writes, “news is what is judged to be newsworthy by journalists, who exercise their news sense within the constraints of the news organizations within which they operate. The news selected must interest their own particular audience or readers, giving rise to the view, common among many print journalists, that ‘the broad shape and nature of the press is ultimately determined by no one but its readers’ (Whale 1980:85).”

It happens that story selection continues to the end, particularly under circumstances where the newspaper happens to have excess stories. First it is with the first editorial meeting that may reject some of the proposals from the reporters, which is rare in most publications. Gans (2004, p. 81) sees this first phase as a two-step process (he calls it circular process) of story selection: one determines the availability of news and

relates journalists to sources; the other determines the suitability of news, which ties journalists to audiences.

In some newspapers with adequate staff, if everyone has a story, the editors will decide to have all reporters represented in each issue, which could lead to some stories eventually being rejected for “numerical” reasons. This in itself is a demotivator for reporters to produce more, with some such reporters answering that their editors would not mind if they delivered nothing an entire week.

Some newspapers have fallen into the habit of publishing materials they would rather reject because of an undersupply. The reasons the editors would use, if they could reject as easily, include missing an important policy angle, failing to identify and target the major stakeholders, those which the snake must bite, and dealing with an issue in a very general way by touching up on everything, without a focus. Lack of balance is also another issue. But the decision of such editors is complicated by the urgent demand and push for more materials from designers and their editors. The result is very attenuated stories.

But there is also a different angle to rejecting stories – one where only parts of a story are rejected. Some editors find themselves dealing with poorly supported or balanced claims, issues that are only remotely related to the main story line or simple verbosity. This often leads to original submissions becoming significantly shorter. Particularly for those journalists who are paid per word, this act is tantamount to rejection and lost income, leading to some confrontations.

#### 4.4. Gatekeepers' Responsibilities

**Gatekeepers are fallible:** When the Washington Post newspaper published an award-winning story about an eight-year drug addict in 1981, the “gatekeepers” who edited that story included the much-celebrated journalist Bob Woodward. No one would know that the story was a total fabrication of the reporter, Janet Cooke, until the city’s officials set out to look for the boy, and found that Cooke had totally made up the story.

Woodward, already famous by his breaking coverage of the Watergate Scandal nine years earlier, and winner of several prizes, would defend himself claiming that, the fabrication aside, Cooke had written a very good piece.

"Janet had written a great piece. In a way, both she and the story were almost too good to be true. I had seen her go out on a complicated story and an hour later turn in a beautifully written piece. This story was so well written and tied together so well that my alarm bells simply didn't go off. My skepticism left me. I was personally negligent," Woodward said, according to an article written by a *Washington Post* ombudsman, found in a document compiled by the University of Saint Michaels.

More than 30 years afterwards, he would make another slip of judgment, by joining the band of journalists that believed George W. Bush's claims of the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, a misinformation which Bush would later blame on his spy chief. This is not implying that Woodward made only two mistakes, or that he is an editor that makes mistakes. But both the person and the institution he worked for are both monumental, serving as good examples for the case in point.

Gatekeepers are people who would select the news according to professional standards such as news values (Allan, 2010, p. 40). The judgments of these gatekeepers “revealed how ‘highly subjective, how reliant upon value-judgments based on the gatekeepers’ own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations the communication of news really is (Allan, 2010, p. 196). Gatekeeping bestows or withdraws news journalism legitimacy (Ibid, p. 195). Gatekeeping, together with news selection, is “a form of newsroom subjectivity centred on the constant assessment of rejection and acceptance rules applied to news stories”(Ibid, p. 195.)

Words such as *subjective, experience and attitude* indicate that there are no set of rules that guarantee infallibility to the gatekeeper, as has been attempted with the examples from Woodward.

**Poor differentiation and Specialization:** The above issues are very important to the Ethiopian media as well, where most often the gatekeepers have other education than journalism and limited experience, even if long, without a serious, if at all, on-the- job training. It is also the case that in many places giving an editorial title is a way of promoting a reporter without actually any change in responsibility.

The number of gatekeepers varied in different newspapers, but the *Reporter* newspaper, with two Amharic and one English edition, has the most. The English edition alone has seven editors from the Managing Editor down to the assistant editors. The Amharic edition has 10 editors, from the managing editor and editor-in-chief, both of whom usually focus more on editing rather than writing, down to the several assistant editors, most of whom are involved in content production. All newspapers have editor-in-chiefs. After that it could vary. Some have deputy editor-in-chief, others have senior editors, and so on. *Fortune* has a coach editor.

People hold various editorial positions, from managing editor down to the assistant editors, but most of these positions do not have clear and practical job descriptions even to the occupants themselves. The title names may not portray the responsibilities of the bearers. There are some editor-in-chiefs whose main job is content production, writing news and feature articles, while somebody else focuses on the editing. Even when that is not the case, in some places it was difficult to get a clear answer about a particular editor's job, which could be compounded by an owner making sudden decisions, which employed editors cannot counter.

Compounding the situation is little functional differentiation among editors, even when it exists in paper, and even between some lower editors and reporters. "The experiential newsroom subjectivity" David Manning White explained in 1950 in his original study (Allan, 2010, p. 196) on gatekeeping shows itself as determinant in the consequential relationships that determine the newspapers every week, even if that experience has shaped more independent reporters who expect, or find, little from their editors.

Some media try to create some kind of division of responsibility, but the boundary is hazy. Mostly the reporters, based on their own personal assessments, chose which editor they prefer to deal with, creating an unofficial division of responsibility among the editors. One reporter, working in a condition where the editorial support was wanting, found through experience that two editors have different strengths, one at judging news worthiness and identifying story angle, another at developing content, and started using them accordingly (Personal interview, June 9, 2014).

Another reporter worked in an environment where the position of the editor-in-chief was highly unstable. "Most of them did not assume full-fledged responsibility as they

were yet being trained and others who were able to do so did not stay on long enough to make a full impact on reporters. Therefore, my interaction with them was limited. I usually interacted with the deputy managing editor, the op-ed editor and the research editor as well as the content editor that came on Fridays,” (Personal interview, August 20, 2014.).

**Editors’ Power:** When it comes to making decisions, some editors spoke of “collective” and others of “democratic” decision-making, although both expressions were used to mean that decisions were based on the discussions of the editorial meeting. Some editors have full freedom to make decisions, although they could consult with colleagues and owner; but when the owner came with own agenda, the same editors said that the owner could put in new content that was not discussed and to which the editorial meeting had not agreed. “It happens, there is no denying it. You cannot say no. Sometimes I am told to interview the owner’s friends,” said one journalist, giving examples of published content only by the influence of the owner (Personal interview, May 22, 2014). Other editors also said that they were fully free to make decisions on content, always realizing, however, that the owner always had absolute control.

The responsibilities of some of the higher level editors covered nearly all things that happened on the newspaper, with one deputy managing editor’s responsibilities covering deciding on news, feature articles, photos, design, placement of ads, and number of pages and as well as consulting on the number of copies of the newspaper. Another editor also made full decisions on ads in addition to editing all content on the newspaper. This editor said, “The newspaper will not be out without me seeing it from A to Z, including content and ad. I decide what will be published and what

will not. Sometimes I consult, if I feel the need” (Personal interview, May 22, 2014).

Sometimes content editors also end up making marketing decisions, which leads to compromising their editorial decisions. “There are some that have vowed not to advertise on our newspaper, and yet they send invitations to us for media coverage. When that happens, I turn it down” (Personal interview, May 22, 2014.)

#### **4.5. Reporters’ Productivity**

At a time when American newspapers feel more constrained for financial resources, lose profits to other forms of media, shedding their staff has been one way of cutting cost. On the other hand, if one is maintaining less staff, the subject of doing more with fewer people could look an interesting subject, at least for owners.

A chief operating officer at one newspaper company in the US, as reported on *slate.com*, which quoted *Editor & Publisher*, started measuring column-inches of words to measure the productivity of the journalists working at the company’s various newspapers. This officer found that in some newspapers of his company, the journalists produced 51 pages of words, while at others they produced 300 pages. He is quoted as having said, "This is a new thing. Nobody ever said, 'How many column inches did someone produce?' " (*slate.com*)

The writer for *slate.com* saw this as a celebration of verbosity at the expense of those committed journalists who took the pain to be as concise as possible.

The pressure for such verbosity comes from an unexpected corner in some of the newspapers in Ethiopia. Once newspapers have determined how much space they have for content (as well as for advertisements), they allocate the different types of

content (the news, feature articles, commentaries, reviews) to different pages, based on legal requirement to have 40% of pages dedicated to content. The design process continues as a completed story is delivered, and if the designers find a lot of space in their hands they start pressuring editors not to cut stories or, even, if possible, to add to them so that the space will fill.

Aside from that, however, different newspapers expected different outputs from their reporters with varying degree of stringency. A number of reporters from different newspapers said that they would face no criticism if they failed to deliver any the entire week. One reporter, with experience in a number of newspapers, decided to test the editors' reactions. This reporter said, in a personal conversation with this researcher, "I was deliberately absent from work from Monday to Thursday and went to office on Friday. My editor acted like he was seeing a friend after several days, and said welcome to me."

For some it is that there is a backup of adequate number of colleagues who made sure that there was always enough number of stories. Some answered being under no particular pressure from their editors to deliver even when staff shortage was almost the norm. The reporters are also not strictly required to come up with their own story ideas at most of the newspapers. One reporter said, "Let's just say I deliver between 1 and 7 a week."

Some of these lax environments make, however, differentiation among the poor and strong reporters they have. One reporter (Personal interview, August 26, 2014) said "Nobody says anything if the reporters fail. It is not obligatory. But those who do well, the good ones, could get higher salary increases, which is an incentive."

Others worked in an environment, which always had them under strain to propose new stories and to deliver so much so that staff turn over is high. “Four news, one feature. Actually, not less than four, but up to seven,” said a reporter (Personal Interview, June 9, 2014), who has since gone on to produce up to nine with growing resentment. “There was a time when I started writing on Tuesday. Now there is staff shortage, so I am busy gathering information. I start writing on Thursday afternoon, and then the deadline stresses me and I waste time in confusion.” A reporter who worked in the same place before moving over to another remembered, “a lot of meetings, too much control. People are made to work late and made to get to work very early. It makes the reporters dizzy, and the stress bothers the reporters more than the work itself” (Personal interview, May 22, 2014).

When asked how many stories they were asked to deliver, there was a number that strangely repeated itself among various reporters working with different newspapers – seven (7). Some answered that they delivered 1 to 7, or 5 to 7, or not less than 4 and no more than 7. One respondent said that the minimum required was 5, with experienced reporters required to deliver 7. Obviously, more experienced reporters always had to make up for the deficiencies of beginning reporters or for the lack of enough reporters. Where newspapers as an institution, have taken a step to generously boost the number of reporters they have, the expected productivity has also declined significantly, practically removing nearly all pressure on reporters.

The expectations of the editors in some of the more challenging environments did not take into consideration the experiences of the reporters, according to some of the respondents. One reporter got the job with out any prior education or experience in journalism. This reporter (Personal interview, July 2014) said, “I was required to

bring viable leads and news items by myself, whereas I was expecting that I was going to be assigned news stories and work on them.”While failure to get own tips brought tough criticisms from the editors, there would, nonetheless, be assignments from the office. Another new reporter, who started work as a reporter similarly, said, “I was sent on my first assignment without any training and before I could even tell news and feature apart” (Personal interview, September 2014).

Stiff demand always led to less productivity (in the light of ready to print materials) and less satisfaction and more disappointment, which was distributed among all the staff. Where editors demanded more effort from their reporters, asking for more information, for more people to be interviewed, and for more background, as well as requiring them to rewrite the first version, it is likely that there is always a lot of tension and higher turnover.

The challenge comes from the inability of the reporters to meet the demands of their editors and the editors’ inability to manage crisis situations well as well as the absence of well-trained support staff, such as researchers.

#### **4.6. Getting the News & the Challenges**

The manufacture of news, unlike other forms of production, relies on inputs from individuals and organisations located outside the formal news organisation in which production takes place (Allan, 2010, p. 202).

There is nothing new or revelatory in this passage other than stating the obvious succinctly. Of course, if one is to remind of the media coverage about the flora and fauna discovered on the moon or about how “reporters” in some newspapers in Ethiopia in the early 1990s entirely made up the news in the office, the above

statement, mentioning the importance of *the inputs from individuals and organisations located outside the formal news organization* may be important.

However, in the real sense, the process of getting news may resemble the dance partnership to which Gans referred (it takes two to tango), with the love-hate relationship White and Habshawn identified (Allan, 2010, p. 203).

Whereas Gans (2004) sees the sources often leading the dance with the reporters, there is another tango in the office between reporters and their editors. The reporters, in some instances, lead this dance, among the media considered in this paper even if the editors maintain the authority to approve or reject. One editor spoke of instances of being taken hostage by reporters who sense the vulnerability of their editors, particularly during times of staff shortage (Personal interview, June 9, 2014). A reporter said that he avoided unwelcome assignments by regularly failing to do them. He said, “now my editors take it as my habit, so they do not give me much assignments” (personal interview, May 22, 2014).

As a counter claim to the “hostage crisis” is, however, a reporter who felt she was clobbered into submissiveness by being told she was lazy every time she objected to a story. She said, “The instances and reasons why I did not want to do the stories varied. Once it was because a family member worked for an institution that we were covering. ... Other times the stories may have weak leads and may be time consuming. Others I don’t want to do because I don’t see the relevance the way the editor that proposed the story does, but still I cannot object because my position does not allow me to do so, and I mostly entered into heated arguments whenever I had doubts about a story my editors pitched. ... Sometimes my motives for declining the story were also questioned (ascribed to laziness) and therefore overtime it deterred me

from dissenting stories I did not want to do. This has happened with different editors, I cannot point to one in particular” (Personal interview, August 20, 2014).

Gans (2004, p. 81) says, “I have chosen to cut into the circular process there. From this perspective, story selection is essentially composed of two processes: one determines the availability of news and relates journalists to sources; the other determines the suitability of news, which ties journalists to audiences.”

So one notices a situation where reporters rely on their sources to get stories, and where the editors mostly rely on their reporters to get the stories that the newspapers need, in addition to the PR leads that come in the form of press releases, which is a case of sources taking the initiative to reach out to the media to get coverage.

Considering the kind of liberty (with in certain limits) that reporters have in the media that have been considered, one could say that reporters shape the tone of their newspapers, as mostly the editors are dependent on whatever proposals the reporters are getting. Most of these newspapers have no particular inclination towards any story, and the editors only decide if the story that has been proposed violates some generally understood but not clearly stipulated principles.

There are some common approaches for all reporters. They get invitations, personally or through the media house, they call contacts, or get a call from them. They also get tips from people that wish to make some issues known to the media. Some of the issues they have covered earlier also require a follow-up, which is another way of getting a story. One editor-in-chief says, “We have freelancers working in different organizations, so they tip us. The relationship that you establish is essential. We encourage reporters to form good relationships, to have tea or even lunch with their contacts” (Personal interview, August 28, 2014.).

A reporter who has been on the job for many years includes among his list of contacts “security guards, office messengers and secretaries. They know who is in or out and what is going on, and the messengers give me a look at the documents they are carrying. Secretaries were key people in their knowledge of what is going on; they know many things the managers know” (Personal interview, May 22, 2014).

The most common sources, however, are “mid-level officials, experts and public relation officers”, as well as, for the more experienced, ministers and other executives. Some used a hierarchy of sources – going first to low-level employees who are actually doing the work, and then to their superiors, who could talk authoritatively and on the record.

When some reporters fail to get any tips for news, they revert to what they call “project news” – such news could be customer complaints about a service providing institutions, such as ethio telecom.

The reporters reinforce their chance of getting news in a number of ways. One is making themselves known as journalists by as many people as possible so that tips will come their way. Some media houses encourage informal meetings between their reporters and their sources for coffee or lunch to build stronger relations that will lead to more tips. Meeting or calling sources regularly, treating them like family appear to be part of the solution for the reporters challenge in getting stories.

Getting information or confirmations to leads already obtained is a common challenge faced by most reporters. A senior reporter with an established newspaper said, “Most public relations officials hide information; they are afraid. You get the lead but you find it hard to get verification. There are many stories that fail because of this. It is the same with individuals (business people, scholars, etc). They tell you they heard it first

from you or that they do not want to get involved – *atanekakagn*” (Personal interview, May 20, 2014).

Some reporters contact the right people for details. “But they tell you to come through the PR, and the PR officials have no clue, and they are reluctant to let you meet with the right expert. So I look for other people, even if they talk anonymously” (Personal interview, June 9, 2014). People in government and elsewhere are generally reluctant to give information, said a journalist who, like a number of other reporters, encounters an unusual request. “Some insist that they want to read the story before being published. Some deny after talking on the record” (Personal Interview, May 20, 2014). Another reporter has also experienced some curious sources that he treats differently. “There are some sources who I do not call until the end of the week, because if I call them early, they invite the state media to a press conference and give away my story,” (Personal Interview, May 22, 2014).

Most of these indicate the “hate” side of the love-hate relationship between reporters and their sources. White and Hobsbawm (as cited in Allan, 2010, p. 203) emphasize PR sources in elaborating the relationship they identified, and they see both the journalists and the PR sources as having their own objectives, with a requirement for mutual reciprocity and cooperative ways of working to achieve their professional objectives. “Getting too close” to sources offends a key professional principle, and risks blunting journalists’ critical edge transforming the journalistic watchdog into a public relations lapdog (Allan, 2010, p. 203). Some reporters have lost important sources because of their failure to be “lapdogs.”

Reporters are reminded to make sure that their sources are always aware of what they are – journalists – as a way of making sure that their sources will not abuse the

relationship and think that they can have the journalists do whatever they want to. By getting too close to sources, journalists risk “blunting journalists’ critical edge transforming the journalistic watchdog into a public relations lapdog”(Allan, 2010, p. 203). For this reason sometimes some editors transfer tips from one reporter to another, if the first is understood to be a little too close to the subjects that will be interviewed for that story. The same happens when the first reporter is understood to be negatively biased against the people that will end up being sources for the story. It could be this sense of “mutual reciprocity” which, despite all challenges, enables journalists to get the stories they need by the end of the week.

Although the notion that journalists transmit information from sources to audiences suggests a linear process, in reality the process is circular, complicated further by a large number of feedback loops (Gans, 2004, p. 81). Part of this complication could be when sources get unfavourable questions from reporters. If they have personal connection with editors, they call the reporter’s bosses, which sometimes creates the impression that the reporter had not only been ignorant but also was trying to engage in unfounded defamation. In some places, such circumstances could lead to sudden panic that could lead to suspending or dropping a story, or to putting out a corrigendum unnecessarily.

#### **4.7. News Assignment to Reporters**

Assignments are a blessing or a curse. Beginning reporters in environments requiring them to generate their own tips always find it a respite when they get assignments from office. For the more experienced, it is always a nuisance, an assignment to take half heartedly, or to make sure it will not come to them again by deliberately failing on assignments. However, assignments are common in every newspaper, leading even

some experienced reporters to almost give up to personally look for tips. “There are many assignments from the office, so I am not looking for many stories these days. Some invitations come directly to me” (Personal Interview, June 9, 2014).

In some places when story suggestions come from the very top in the media house, the journalists did those stories with a sense of priority, because failure to do a story tipped by a boss could lead to more altercation than if the reporter failed in his or her stories. Other reporters worked on those assignments even when they felt some ethics were being compromised; because it would become an issue of job security. “In every media, you do stories you do not believe in. Not only in Ethiopia but also everywhere, including Al Jazeera. You do not say no, because there is no meaning to that” (Personal Interview, May 22, 2014).

#### **4.8. Conflict between Editors and Reporters**

The degree varies but newsrooms are not without a good portion of tension and conflict among the staff, and it is not always, though less frequently, with good reason. Elsewhere where the media is more developed, such as in the US, part of the reason could be that “editors rise from among the ranks of reporters based on their reporting abilities, but the ascension often occurs without the benefit of specialized leadership or management training” (Sheehan, 2013, p. 11). Ironically, that does not look like a common occurrence in the media houses that have been considered in this paper. There are a number of scenarios relevant to this issue.

One is that in all but one of the newspapers considered the editors have held the top position for many years. In one place a titular reshuffle took place through which a reporter managed to hold the position of the editor-in-chief, because the editor-in-chief holding the position no longer qualified to meet new government requirements,

such as having a first degree. The new editor-in-chief said, “My responsibilities did not change when I became an editor-in-chief.” The old editor-in-chief settled for a lower title, but still sees the entire paper “from A to Z”.

In other places the staff turn over is so fast that there is no such thing as a reporter becoming more experienced through time and growing to the position; where a staff reporter has been promoted to the position of editor-in-chief, it has been a case of fire-fighting where the newspapers are in desperate need of someone to hold the position for legal reasons. Speaking from personal experience, it is not uncommon for an editor-in-chief to be appointed with the reminder that he or she continues as a reporter in practice, with minor follow-up duties on other reporters or producing minutes of the editorial meetings, while a part-time editor took care of editing the stories.

In both cases it is not uncommon for most editors to have little experience in reporting, which, in a way, creates a “hostage crisis” in the newsroom, because editors are too dependent on their reporters, and the latter know that. That lurking feeling surfaces every time a vulnerable editor interprets an unwelcome behaviour from a reporter as a sign of the reporter’s feeling that a severe staff shortage prevents the editor from taking harsh measures.

This has led to pictures of always busy reporters, permanently on the move and pushed to deliver by an editor who spends most of his time in the office and who may not be as good as the reporters themselves, at least in the eyes of the reporters. A significant number of reporters feel little need for their editors and as much respect for their understanding of what makes news. One reporter said, “There is not much influence with us. Once I have written it, usually there would be not much change. [The editors] are weak. They miss details. I would, if I could, change the story

perception of my editors” (Personal interview, May 20, 2014) Another reporter said, “It disturbs me that when a letter of complaint comes regarding a story we have published, our editors panic and publish it even when there is nothing wrong with our story” (Personal interview, May 20, 2014).

Such complaints by the reporters are probably balanced by a frustration described by some editors. One said, “It has now become very, very difficult to get dedicated people. It has become the condition of the country. Many applicants come, but it just bores you; the people that come responding to your ads drive you crazy on every aspect” (Personal interview, May 22, 2014).

Conflicts are few in most and common in some. One editor has encountered a number of situations where staff reporters as well as non-writing staff among the editors received money to publish materials on the newspaper. One editor said, “We fire them immediately, when we get proof of what they have done,” (Personal interview, May 22, 2014).

Where ethics is not the issue, tempers grow high as deadlines approach and there is still a lot more to do. Trying to communicate something to a reporter or to an editor and not being understood could lead to some altercation, according to both reporters and editors. This is cause to some serious frustration on both sides.

Some reporters said that they try to say something to their editors, but their editors act like they read their minds and harshly tell them to shut up. Some editors, on the other hand, say that no matter how patiently they explain things to their reporters, mostly it falls on deaf ear. Both sides seek to be understood by the other, but neither do it, according to the answers.

An editor said, “I do not understand why, but what I say to the reporters and what they hear are totally different, as I understand from their responses. This leads to angry exchanges. So sometimes I tell them to just shut up and listen to what I have to say, even if they think what I was saying could be wrong” (Personal interview, October 29, 2014). It takes two to tango, and if editors feel frustrated, so do their reporters. One reporter explained, “I fight with the researchers because they never get me the information I seek. The editor-in-chief starts editing my story before reading it, so he asks me for information that I have already included. The coach editor does not encourage talking,” (Personal interview, June 9, 2014).

Another reporter got into frequent conflicts because she believed that the extra requests for information were simply not feasible.

Sometimes, an editor requests that I ask questions to sources that I have already asked because they are not satisfied with the answer, or think that I was too gullible to believe their answer. I also occasionally enter into arguments not to do extra work on an already complete story because information is hard to come by; or because I have a very unwilling or easily irritable source; and other times because I am busy on the next story and the suggested changes are too time consuming which means I have to drop the other stories I am working on, which would cause conflict with the other editors, (Personal interview, August 20).

Deadline also brought this reporter into frequent conflicts. When she should go out and gather information, the editors want her to sit and write what she already has. By the time she is done writing, offices are closed, and few people answer their phones or are willing to talk to a journalist at that hour.

This friction could be due to “the contrasting roles of writers and editors”. “The editor represents insider power, presumably a recipe for moderation and control. The writer is the untamed outsider, manoeuvring cherished artwork along a hostile assembly

line” (Sheehan, 2013, p. 34). The above reporter attributed part of the problem to “overzealous and newly hired editor-in-chiefs who were told to be tough on reporters if they want to be obeyed and merely shouted at reporters to be on their desk in the middle of field work, with out understanding the context in which news is gathered.”

The long list of editors that influenced this reporter’s work included managing editor, deputy managing editor, op-ed editor, research editor and content editor

Where the tension and conflict are more and stronger, however, there have been equally higher and stronger senses of doing better as well. Despite the grievances that have been caused, both reporters and editors see something good coming out of “the violence”. The “tension can result in outstanding journalism” (Sheehan, 2013). Writing from experience, however, there is some gap that has been created between the reporters and the editors, with the former considering the latter as the leadership whose job it is to make the lives of the reporters miserable, and the latter, the editors, labouring long hours on stories submitted to them and failing to be appreciated by the reporters for the good work they think they have done. Add to that poor coordination and assignment of responsibilities.

#### **4.9. Reporters in the Office?**

To sign or not to sign timesheets? That is the question, and most have chosen to eschew it, whereas the use of timesheets is believed to have created opportunities for editors and reporters to have sometime to meet each other, however briefly, and update each other. The “timesheet” difference tells a world of story. A reporter could go unnoticed an entire week, if not more, with the editors not surprised to see the reporter after days, and not minding that the reporter has failed to deliver.

A reporter quoted earlier (under the title Reporters' Productivity) tested her editors by deliberately missing work for four days, for which she had no criticism at all when she showed up on the fifth day. An editor-in-chief at a different newspaper said, "Informally we [he and the reporters] exchange information on corridors. ... We may not meet at all, [it is] enough to know that they are working"(Personal interview, August 28, 2014).

Another reporter, also quoted under the title Reporters' Productivity, said that the timesheet, which the reporters were made to sign at office hours, contributed to the "dizziness" they suffered, adding that "people are made to work late and made to get to work very early" (Personal Interview, May 22, 2014). Where the reporters are required to sign the time sheet, it is also serious, as it could reflect on their paycheck. An editor defended the practise, "Sometimes it is the only way to make sure that the reporters are actually doing their jobs" (Personal interview, June 9, 2014).

Other editors and reporters say that they still get to meet with each other at least once a day in the office without putting a time schedule to it. They used that time to interact and update each other.

#### **4.10. Intention of Sources**

Academics, journalists, and public relations professionals increasingly believe that public relations is influential in shaping news and editorial contents in newspapers (Allan, 2010, p. 203).

Gans (2004) writes about what he calls news saturation, whereby the sources keep providing too much information, some of which ends up becoming news. "The Washington and Saigon pentagons were able to saturate the news media with inflated

body counts and successes in winning the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese population, whereas the anti-war movement lacked the resources to rebut more than a fraction of these reports, even when it had convincing evidence," he writes with reference to the Vietnam War (Gans, 2004, p. 121).

Gans (2004, p. 134) says that journalists lose the confidence of their peers and superiors when they give in to the temptations of invitations to exclusive interviews with the presidents or to private parties at the White House. Reporters become restrained by symbiotic relationships with sources or are co-opted or get "involved", all of which end up affecting their work (Gans, 2004, p. 135).

A little related to such circumstances was when one editor (interviewed for this paper) met an opposition politician, who told him about a meeting with the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. "I met him outside the parliament. He came to me and told me in detail about a meeting that he and a number of other opposition politicians had with the Prime Minister the previous day. I called all the other people he mentioned, and all said no such meeting had taken place" (Personal Interview, August 28, 2016).

While such occurrences are rare, many of the respondents say that some of the sources that tip them have personal interests. These sources included "consultants involved in a contract award, business people that have been asked to pay a lot of tax, or people that have a conflict with someone.

One reporter said, "They (the sources) could benefit by revealing the information; sometimes it is because they disagree with someone; they absolve themselves and come to you and say they were victimized because they did something" (Personal interview, August 28, 2014). Another reporter politely accepted everything the original sources told him, did further investigation and confront them again when he

found different information. This reporter said, “All people have their own interests. People do not just do you a favour. When these sources come, you get everything they have to give you not to offend them, and then you will do your own investigation, and find that some of the information you got earlier is not correct and you have to drop it. You go to other sources for balancing, and then you will discover that the issue is actually different from what your source told you. Then you will go back to this source. Then he will either admit or even tell you more information which he had decided to keep a secret from you” (Personal Interview, May 20, 2014).

The sources of the information could be out to attack a business competitor or trying to bring to light the works of some good people who are not seeking any publicity (Personal interview, August 26, 2014).

They come to journalists because they have vested interests or out of public interest. Tamirat Gebregiorgis, managing editor of *Fortune*, says “You have to protect yourself from being taken advantage of. You avoid that with knowledge and understanding. When you do a story, ensure accuracy beyond reasonable doubt; see it with context; find the analysis, the meaning; then the background. This way the chance of mistake is minimal. Achieving that is a constant challenge. There has to be a culture in the office, a large number of people thinking in a similar manner (Personal interview, June 7, 2014). “Getting too close” to sources offends a key professional principle, and risks blunting journalists’ critical edge transforming the journalistic watchdog into a public relations lapdog (Allan, 2010, p. 203).

#### **4.11. What They Want to Accomplish through the News**

“The job of someone like me is to sit at the back and throw bottles,” said a journalist. His favourite targets included politicians and their PR advisers. “Politicians employ

an entire industry, often using public money, to present themselves as favourably as possible and I certainly don't see it as my job to inflate the egos of little men," (Allan, 2010, p. 203).

Muluken Yewondwossen, the editor-in-chief at *Capital* newspaper, remembers two particular stories where he felt strongly that the public should be informed. "When I did the story about the house rent for the president (ex-president Girma Woldegiorgis), my intention was to let the public know how much money had been spent and to raise the question if it was affordable. Another time, PM Meles Zenawi scolded Bulcha Demeksa in 2008 saying that Ethiopia would not import wheat from abroad, and in a week, the association of flour factories held a meeting and decided to import wheat, because they had not been able to find supply in the local market. My focus then was showing how poorly the government was informed" (Personal Interview, May 22, 2014).

The answers among the respondents as to what they wanted to achieve through the news varied from "nothing" to an attempt to give readers value to the time and money they spend reading the newspaper. Most commonly just passing information is what many of the reporters would like to achieve. Getting feedback for the news they have reported gives some satisfaction for some. Strictly in relation to the story itself, some reporters would like to be able to put actual names to the often-anonymous sources. Others only want to know what people felt, or how they reacted, if the story they produced was an exclusive.

Nafkot Yosef, a reporter with Addis Admas, says she had a clear purpose when she wrote a story about a school in Addis Ababa, whose facilities were far below the standards the government set. The school was closed following her report. When

thousands of peasants were expelled from nine Kebeles in Benishangul Gumuz Regional State, and were kept in a temporary camp in Finote Selam, Gojam, “I went there looking like a peasant, wearing a plastic pair of shoes and dressed like them, carrying my recorder in a little sack.” She says her story contributed to the case going both to parliament and to court, and the expelled people returning back. “This makes me happy. I have done a lot of stories that have made a lot of impact. I have also made a change in illegal slaughterhouses. I had done one story about abortion, pretending to be pregnant in order to get the full detail,” (Personal interview, August 26, 2014).

For some it is a serious mission to give a balanced and well-investigated coverage to the audience who, they believed, made important decisions based on what they read. Largely, though, it seemed that many did their reporting because it is their job. It may be someone other than the actual reporter who realized the impact of the story, often the one who edits their stories, who realizes the impact of the information they have submitted and asks for more information, which gives a unique and stronger angle which expressly identifies a target.

Outcomes of such reports have been seen in business and government, which reporters and editors proudly mention, such as the case with Nafkot’s stories. Bringing the metaphor of the snake back, it is rarely the case that the major targets of the snake will readily avail themselves. Speaking from personal experience, the case of the substandard school would not be a story all on its own but only a tip for a bigger investigation into whether and how the education bureau did required inspection and if the standards it mentioned were achievable or not. The snake would find a bigger victim to bite. Sometimes this impact could be achieved with a simple

rearrangement of the information already available with, if possible, a few more interviews or research. At other times the story could entirely change and require interviews all over again. This ends up causing most of the conflicts and the mutual frustrations between reporters, who might already be too stressed out with too many assignments and an unforgiving deadline or who might simply not care at all, and editors, who sense the bigger impacts of stories at the highest level of government. These impacts have been achieved through the “knowledge and understanding” of issues referred to above, however little, which gives a unique perspective and a critical edge, and being able to see them in the light of “the norm” – the bureaucratic, legal and policy perspective or others.

#### **4.12. Editing Stories**

This depends on the editor and house requirements. It could be a joyride of editing them as fast as they come or it could be an endeavour that could take up to several hours for one piece. This is rarely a function of the quality of the story but rather the demand of the house.

One top editor spoke of a thick line dividing the reporters and the editors, to mean that the editors largely only correct mistakes they notice in the story, largely keeping the story as it is. “It does not even take 10 minutes,” one editor said. The thick line is deliberately put in place so that the reporters will work more or less independently after their stories have been discussed during the editorial meeting. This editor said, “outside the editorial meeting, no body involved on any reporter’s story.” For another newspaper, there was no thick line as such, but rather an effort by the editor not to offend his reporters by being stringent.

Here and at a number of other newspapers, the interaction between the reporters and the editors is minimal, and rarely are their stories returned to them or even rejected. One editor, who takes less than 10 minutes on average editing one story, says, “When I edit, I look at the content, if there are ugly expressions, abusive expressions on institutions and ethnicities – some reporters think it is okay to use some expressions if the person they interviewed has said it” (Personal interview, August 28, 2014). Another only checked for fairness, balance, conflicts in the story and if there could be any elements in the story that could create legal complications (Personal interview, May 27, 2014).

A recurring remark among editors is that their reporters are well experienced and they know what they are doing, minimizing the work of the editor. Such editors have contributed to the confidence of reporters, as opposed to others who make the reporters feel like they have done nothing when the editing is completed. At extreme places the narrative flow of stories could be changed, at least. Sometimes the entire story could come out totally different in emphasis and angle. An editor at *Fortune* nearly rewrites the whole story so much so that some reporters have complained to him that they feel like they lose themselves once their stories are out from him. He said, “I take time to try and understand what the main issue that needs to be emphasized in that story is. Usually I find the elements for the lead dispersed all over the place in the story. I rewrite the lead accordingly. That changes the composition of the story, and I will need more information to make the newly written story complete. It could be background information we could find on our own, or we will have to call different people. Sometimes the reporters will have to make several calls after they have submitted their stories to me. Occasionally, I do the calls myself,” (Personal interview, June 9, 2014).

Some stories could take several hours to edit, this editor says. But the deadline pressure is such that sometimes even the already available information may not be properly used.

Sometimes a newspaper may not have the kind of editor-in-chief it needs in place. This leads to various editors involving in every story, leaving it to the hapless reporter to compromise their differences. One reporter who had to satisfy several editors for every story she did expressed her experiences tellingly and at length:

It is tricky because it is hard to get unanimous consent on the quality of a job. Almost all of them value different qualities about a story. One of my editors was a stickler for deadline and valued a reporter that never dropped a story no matter how scarce the information at hand is; two others valued a detailed work and demanded so much information about a single issue that it almost felt like writing a research paper. Another valued data, and a different editor focused on the relevance of the lead and whether the information gathered was enough to support and build on the lead. Some editors valued long articles as it utilized a lot of space on the newspaper and helped meet the content-to-ad ratio while others valued short and precise stories. Some editors liked narrative styles while others valued more academic styles of writing.... so the reporter was subject to varied scrutiny. Sometimes these values conflict with each other especially when deadline was near and the reporter each week is hard pressed to make compatible (harmonize) all the complaints and comments forwarded to him/her. It was hard pleasing everybody and displeasing most of them came with consequences that made it difficult to carry out the job the next week. On the positive side, it is always good to have my editors' opinions on Monday afternoon when stories are proposed because their varied and informative input adds to the quality of my story. And hearing them explain their stand and their thought process helped me learn a lot. I value the education that I got from them which still serves me well today, in a completely different line of work (Personal interview, August 20, 2014).

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **5.1. Conclusion**

The best stories are more complete and more comprehensive. They contain more verified information from more sources with more viewpoints and expertise, exhibit more enterprise and reportorial effort (<http://www.americanpressinstitute.org>).

The API lists a number of factors that make a good story. They are important, interesting, engaging; they prove their relevance to the audience, have strong characters, use detail, connect to deeper themes, explore tensions, capture emotions, provide context, surprise the reader, and empower the reader.

It is rare that when a story finally passes to design, it has attained that quality that satisfies every one involved. But the different perceptions among journalists tell their own story. While most fail to give a clear answer, some are convinced that the stories they have submitted are complete if the editors ask no more questions.

But the good and complete story is a rarity and an ideal the efforts towards which are largely responsible for shaping most newsroom environments. Such a story shows an understanding of the issue that makes the news, an understanding of the different angles to it, includes the voices of the right people relevant to the issue and examines the rules and regulations affecting the issue, as well as includes appropriate expert voices to make sound opinions on the issues involved, says an editor.

Sometimes when a story comes short of that ideal, it has a cost. Some of the relevant information that has been made available in the reporting process cannot be used without other supporting information, forcing the editors to trim the story so that the pieces of information that remain could make a coherent ensemble.

The editing process usually contributes to the impact of the stories, even when incomplete. That, too, depends on the editors' skill, experience, critical thinking and understanding of the information at hand. A lot of interpretation and rearrangement of information takes place, which raises more questions and finds new answers, presenting the readers with empowering information.

From personal information, a few newspapers are operating at far below the standard owners had hoped to achieve through time when they had established the newspapers. Getting good stories is a function of several factors. Some have tried to achieve quality through sheer force, others by employing many people, some of which they entice out media houses that are believed to have stronger environments. By the end both have settled at an equilibrium of poor quality journalism.

There is no media house among those considered in this research that has created an environment where journalists could be nurtured. There is no media house that is headed by someone with sound education in journalism – in fact, there are no editors that are journalism graduates at all the papers considered in this research. Even at reporting level, the number of journalism graduates is far smaller than those that come from diverse fields.

It is an area where people “learn” journalism through practice. It is an area where the content of newspapers is randomly decided. It is also an area where the balance of power could always be in favour of the reporters, as few of the editors have passed through a lot of reporting earlier in their careers.

Human resource recruitment in several publications could be as simple as finding out where they have been before. If it is believed that they have passed through some

harsh environment, it is hoped that they might have learned something. Such recruitment techniques have been repeatedly used.

So who decides good reporting, good stories and completeness, and how? How much are professional criteria compromised? How do journalists strike a balance between the time they give to their reporting and editing and the time they spare for their personal lives? The answers to these questions have created widely differing environments and contents; they have also led some to make up parts of the stories they are reporting; others have walked out of editorial meetings and never returned, or quit their jobs within the first few hours of starting it. Others have braved through a lot of frustration, literally shedding many tears in the struggle to meet the expectations for higher quality stories.

There is a lot to be learned to deliver good journalism to readers in Ethiopia. The solution lies both within and out of media houses, including the political environment. An awakening is yet to come, and may be then, when there are more newspapers and when those newspapers begin reaching at least tens of thousands of people across the country a fertile ground may be created for the profession to germinate and grow.

## **5.2. Recommendations**

This paper is not supposed to create an image of a robust and healthy media presence in Ethiopia. By all standards Ethiopian media is far from meeting the information need of a population that is soon expected to reach 100 million. The market for the private newspapers considered in this research is largely in Addis Ababa. Advertising is also dominated by only very few newspapers for others to raise the capital they may need for development. There is stiff competition for a very little market, and the newspapers themselves are too small and too few to create a vibrant and competitive

job market. This argument is presented to lay the ground for the recommendations that follow.

1. That the government should revisit its policies related to independent media so that there will be more not just in Addis Ababa but all over the country.
2. Journalism schools should aim at graduating students that not only could easily coached in the work environment but that can also fill the perception and knowledge gap in the media.
3. The media council, which is still in the process of establishment, should vigorously work with media houses to develop some consensus over certain professional standards each house should fulfil irrespective of their differences. It should also help set the mechanisms through which the media houses will plan to meet those standards.
4. Media houses should appreciate the challenges that they have and come up with in-house solutions to resolve them.
  - 4.1. Following on what Gans found out, the newspapers should have a strong base of story suggesters, including the reporters themselves as well editors, other supporting staff and, if possible, from outside, too.
  - 4.2. The newspapers again will need to have one or more persons who design the story, identifying the issues that will be covered, the information that will be required and drafting questions that the reporters will have to ask. As reporters become well experienced, they can not only graduate out of this process but also grow to become editors themselves.
  - 4.3. There has to be a system through which the media houses will constantly review the performance of the reporters. Drawing a thick line and not involving in what the reporters do or, on the other extreme, creating a

very difficult environment where even totally new and inexperienced reporters are overwhelmed with pressure and stress are issues that need to be addressed to create an environment that nurtures journalists.

5. Establish strong domestic initiatives to recognize works of good journalism
6. Academic institutions and media houses should partner to create strong short courses for practitioners at various levels.

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## Appendix One: Questions to Reporters

1. What is your educational background?
2. What is your prior professional background?
3. How do you define news?
4. Is there anything you have been told in the office about how to write a news piece for your newspaper? If yes, what?
5. Are there any documents (office policies, manuals, etc) that you have been provided when you started working here to guide you in your work?
6. How many stories are expected of you a week? How much do you achieve?
7. What do you want to accomplish when you write news?
8. What are the ways you get the stories that you work on during the week?  
(Assigned by my editors; suggested by colleagues; I contact sources and others; sources contact me, etc)
9. What are the kinds of sources do you use or have?
10. When sources contact you to give you stories, do they have any other interests than just tipping you, i.e., do they have any vested interest in seeing that story covered?
  - a. Are they in any way related to the story?
  - b. Are they in any way affected by that story? Do they stand to benefit in any way?
  - c. What do you do once you get a tip from any source?
  - d. When you get these tips, how do you judge if it is the kind of stories that you want to work on? What criteria do you use?
11. How many of the stories that you work on do you get on your own, without being assigned by the editors?

12. How do you get the tips approved by your editors?
13. With how many editors (and which ones) do you interact in the process of producing your story?
14. If there are more than one editors you deal with, how does that affect your production?
15. Have you ever been assigned to do stories that you would rather not do, but you did it anyway because you cannot say no? Why did you not want to do these stories? Why were you not able to say no? Who gave the assignment?
16. Have you ever been made to add elements in your story, or cut some, by the influence of your editors, even though you did not believe in it? If yes, what was their argument? What was yours?
17. What reasons bring you into conflict with your editors as regards the news you write?
18. Who at your newspaper influences you work the most or the least? In what way?
19. Who, outside your newspaper, influences you work the most or the least? In what way?
20. Please explain what kind of deadline, if any, your editors place on you.
21. Are deadlines a challenge for you? If yes, how? If no, why?
22. What methods do you use to meet deadlines?
23. What are the reasons stories that you are working on fail?
24. What do you do to deal with the problems that cause your stories to fail?
25. How do you explain the level of understanding and cooperation of sources such as the public, government agencies or private enterprises and their managers in the process of your production?

26. Please describe the interaction you have with your editors between the time you start working on a story and when the final version is completed.
27. Is the interaction mentioned above useful (how?) or harmful (how?) to your performance as a reporter?
28. What would it be like to work without an editor?
29. Do you need help from more experienced reporters and editors?
30. If so, what kind of help?
31. What personal limitations do you have as a reporter?
32. Do you need to do researches for your stories? If yes, what kind of researches?
33. Who does the research for your stories? Yourself or is there another person?
34. What makes a news item complete for you?
35. How is the reporter treated by the media house? Does that affect the way you produce a story?

## **Appendix Two: Questions to Editors**

1. The integrated master plan – when did your newspaper become aware of it?
2. How did you cover it? How many stories have been written on it?
3. Do you think the media could have played a role to stop all the violence by covering the master plan?
4. What is your life and professional background before coming to this position?
5. What stages have you passed through in journalism career before coming to this position?
6. How long have you been an editor?
7. How long have you been at your current editorial position?
8. How did you come to this position?
9. Have you had any training for that?
10. How much decision-making freedom do you have?
11. What types of decisions do you make as part of your duty for the position you hold?
12. Are the owners/publishers involved in the editorial decision making directly or indirectly?
13. How much do owners influence your decision-making?
14. What is your role as regards the news and feature you carry on your newspaper?
15. Do you also take part in producing content?
16. How many editorial meetings do you have during the week?
17. What do you do during those editorial meetings?
18. Are there any guidelines and/or principles for the way you conduct the editorial meetings?

19. What characterizes your editorial meetings? What is the spirit like?
20. What factors do you consider when you are debating to approve a story?  
(Internal/ external)?
21. Are government proclamations, rules, regulations, policies etc raised during your editorial meetings as part of your discussion over story proposals by journalists?
22. What internal influences affect the story production process?
23. What external influences are there – government? Police? Court? Advertizers? Sources? Etc.
24. Are there values that characterize your newspaper? What are they?
25. What kind of standard do you have for the news and features you print?
26. What criteria do you use when planning the news content during the first editorial meeting?
27. How do you define news?
28. What qualities must a news item have before you are satisfied?
29. How often do you need to reject stories that had been planned and produced?
30. What are the reasons that force you to reject those stories?
31. Have you ever faced problems with your bosses as a result of gatekeeping decisions you had to make? What kind of problems? How did you deal with them?
32. Have you ever faced problems with people and institutions outside your media house as a result of gatekeeping decisions you had to make? How did you deal with them?
33. Have these problems in any way changed the way you deal with stories from your reporters?

34. Does your newspaper have a code of conduct that the journalists must abide by?
35. What ethical issues do you encounter?
36. Does your newspaper have any rules to deal with ethical breaches from your journalists?