Spreading Hatred
A study of Facebook in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Though not new, hate speech has become a big issue during the last few years in Ethiopia. While people generally talked about the onslaught of hate speech getting wings, there had been no theoretical / empirical studies examining the Social Media and the Discourse of Hate Speech in Ethiopia. This study has investigated how Facebook has worked in catalyzing / worsening hate speech in the country. To serve this objective, qualitative research method was applied and the data was collected from 22 interviewees who had a close know-how of the issue. Observation supplemented by secondary sources was also employed. The study has shown that Facebook becomes a safe haven for individuals, groups and extremists to post and spread their toxic ideas that can lead to varied ethnic tensions. The nature of spreading information within seconds to a wide range of people, users' behavior, lack of know-how about usage of Facebook and its impact on the polarized politics and thus providing a convenient cost free link to the extremist Diasporas have been identified playing a major role.

Keywords: Hate Speech, Social Media, Facebook, Mainstream, Media, Extremists

INTRODUCTION

According to Özarslan (2014), Social media platforms are becoming fundamental communication tools since the past few decades. Wide spread of Smartphone and other mobile devices is helping to access these platforms easier. Hence, it is influencing everyday lifestyle of individuals, groups, politicians, etc. both unintentionally or by design. Since it has the potential to contribute to the democratization process in a given society or nation, it could also intensify political extremism. Of late, social media looks becoming a safe haven for hate speech for political and social activists to spread their ideologies far and wide. Though the issue of hate speech is not a new phenomenon in the world, its frequency and speed have visibly accelerated after the discovery of the social media outlets (digital technology) such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and so forth. Discourse of hate speech is becoming the most debatable and divisive issue in the current world politics (Özarslan, 2014). Gagliardone et al. (2015) articulated that social media is becoming a weapon for the extremists to propagate the most violent forms of expressions targeted to specific individuals or groups. Hence, the emboldening of racism, nationalism, xenophobia and extremism are disturbing the sense of togetherness and creating diversification and destruction in both the developed and the developing world. Perry and Olsson (2009) hold social media outlets in the form of text messages, blogs, twitters, pictures and so forth responsible for this.

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Hate speech in Africa takes political, economic and socio-cultural dimensions and political dimension has had the lion's share in escalating it. The Rwandan genocide (1994), Kenya's post-election happenings in 2008, the recent Burundi's election in 2015, the South Sudan steady conflict and the recent South Africa's xenophobic violence against migrants are among many political dimensions of hate speech. Hate speech has been constantly taken as a weapon for most of political violence and disobedience in Africa (Nakitare, 2016). According to Tesfai (2016), Ethiopia is one of the African countries currently facing problems due to hatred spread by social media. As the pace of hate speech is constantly accelerating, ethnic tensions in countries are increasing both within and without. This paper has scrutinized dialogues of social media and hate speech in Ethiopia through Facebook.

CONCEPTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS

Ellison (2007) defines social media networks as online communication channels that help the community to interact in public sphere by creating their own public profile and share their connections with others. These networks come with a great change in way of global communication and interaction and users of these platforms can simply produce contents and spread and share within a minute (Ellison, 2007).
Eysenbach (2008) stated that social interaction and communication, membership, using different searching engines, openness, and collaboration among users are five fundamental characters of social media networks. Each social media networking platforms has its own features and communication systems and the users have a freedom to choose which outlet he or she would use. Currently going by the number of members, Facebook is leading over the other social media outlets (Eysenbach, 2008).

FACEBOOK

Launched in 2004 by a former Harvard University student Mark Zuckenberg, Facebook has shown the most outstanding lead in online community in a very short time. On Facebook, users can create their own accounts and post their pictures, share thoughts, comment on other users' posts, and keep in touch with friends in a very convenient and simple way. Facebook became champion over other similar platforms that were invented in 1990s (Auvinen, 2012). Since 2014 the number of Facebook users in the world has reached more than 1.24 billion (Gagliardone, 2014).

This has brought together different civil engagements, political activists, and created an inclusive civil society, inter-linkage of business, entrepreneurial environment and new social dynamics. Facebook is now attached to the daily practice of individuals in different disciplines of social life in online and offline practices. It becomes a promising tool for a social connection and interaction around the globe (Mourtada and Salem, 2011). Significantly, Facebbok becoming not only a tool for sharing thoughts and keeping contacts with friends, is also becoming a prominent alternative political forum for interested groups to debate on specific political issues (Kisilu, 2014). Facebook despite its advantages is also changing the dynamics of political participation; political extremism is aggravating through diverse extremes strikes and violent and contaminated contents (Udoka, 2015).

NOTATIONS OF HATE SPEECH

Different authors, policy makers and governments define hate speedh in different ways and this makes hate speech the most contested phrase. What comprises hate speech, how we understand whether it is against some individuals or groups, who are its victims, what is its intention; all these are paradoxical and complex matters because different people understand and interpret them very differently. Cohen Almagor (2011) says hate speech is an attempt to marginalize and discriminate against particular individuals and disadvantaged groups such as minorities. It is a tool to dehumanize, defame, and discriminate against target groups.

The Council of Europe (1997) defines hate speech as any expression of racism, xenophobia, ant-Semitism or aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism that targets minorities and migrants. In a wide spectrum, Benesch (2014) explained hate speech as problematic and thorough and a catalyzing tool that magnifies the violence and hostilities over some particular individuals or groups. She identified five basic elements that identify hate speech and help in finding measures to curb it. These are the feature and fame of the speaker, the perceptions and emotions of audiences, the content of the speech, the social and historical contexts during the incidence, and means of communication.

The fact that, the concept of hate speech is vague and paradoxical both in academics and policy, its dangerous impact is not disclaimed. It seriously violates the human rights of individuals and humiliates their stature, which then leads the victim to varied psychological and troubled situations. Besides, it also terrorizes, isolates and degrades the self-confidence of individuals (Leets, 2002, Downs and Cowan, 2012). Nielsen (2002) and Parekh (2006) articulated hate speech that targets group can also lead to creation of discrimination and fear among the members of the victimized group that also potentially leads to withdrawal of participation and expressing the ideas in their community. The fear and silence of the victims pushes them to take aggressive actions and violations (Nielsen, 2002 and Parekh, 2006).

According to Nemes (2002), social media platforms are becoming a safe haven for disseminating hate speeches. Mainly, after the coming of different mobile technologies and increased use of social media outlets the pace of hate speech has aggravated.

HATE SPEECH ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Gagliardon (2014) in his article "Mapping and Analyzing Hate Speech Online" said that outlets such as Facebook are contributing a lot for building democracy via sharing experiences through information and acting as facilitator on the issues of political debates and socio-economic issues. However, it is also contributing a lot for circulation of hate speeches that basically violates basic human rights because of the chance of anonymity in these platforms. As most of social media platforms invite users to post images, videos, audios and other contents, the users have freedom to practice anything they need; accordingly the chance of posting and disseminating inflammatory messages is very high. Mutsvairo (2016). views social media becoming a channel for hate speech, intolerance, and increased disempowerment that targets particular ethnicity, religion, gender and so forth.

Khondker (2011) in his study showed that social media played a big role in a political protest during the Arab revolution, which was started in Tunisia in 2010; essentially Facebook and Twitter were used as a weapon for political mobilization that instigated young protesters to come out in the streets for political opposition.

Eltis (2011) and Simpson (2013) find that for the past few years social media hate speech has been drawing the attention of policymakers and academics. Commaerts (2009) noticed that the web pages are contributing to dissemination of hatred as it opens way for fascists, extremists and other 'repressive movements' by allowing them to interact through their online communities.

People can observe a lot of literature is notified and the pace of hate speech is increasing on social media platforms. Harris et al., (2009) say social media is relatively free from any censorship compared to other media; it allows them to express their feelings and thoughts good or evil as far as they did not attach it with physical interaction with others. Further, according to Henry (2009) and Mahoney (2013) social media allows users to detailed messages, gives different options such as re-tweeting, commenting, sharing and linking contents to other platforms enabling their message to reach a broader audience within a short time. Eichhorn (2001) says in Facebook and Twitter it is possible even to create account in others' names or even operate in a fake name. Therefore, no one can identify one's identity even if one posted huge contents full of hatred and insult. Eichhorn expresses fear and concern about this anonymity since it is becoming a concern for the real world. Likewise Nemes (2002) positions that the existence of anonymity on the social media outlets is contributing to the extremists disseminating contaminated messages through hate speech. Eltis (2012), Perry, and Olsson, (2009) say though some social media outlets have rules and regulations to control hate speeches and other acts, enforcement is lacking for want of serious editorial policies and gate keeping.

HATE SPEECH AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

According to Mengistu (2012), freedom of expression is a fundamental tool for a nation to build a vibrant democracy that invites critical discourse with different opinions and voices. It opens a way for inclusive policy by eradicating the authoritarian rule and helps citizens to participate in political and socio-economic affairs of their countries. Thus, if the state interferes to curb hate speech, the repression and political dissent and protests are heightened. At the same time, hate speech's basis of ethical cooperation hampers mutual understating, isolates minority groups from the rest of the society and finally leads to violence. Arcan (2013) also in his study found that the discourse of hate speech is paradoxical due to contradiction between free speech and curbing of hate speech. When the supporters of free speech oppose the hate speech laws, some intellectuals stand alongside the hate speech laws.

Özarslan (2014) holds the freedom of speech is not absolute.. For example, while the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) Article 19 assured the freedom of expression, Article 29 of the declaration shows the limits of the free speech.

> "In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society (UN General Assembly, 1948: 60)".

According to Özarslan (2014), while there are laws that restrict free speech and curb hate speech, the authority of punishment is given to the states. These laws are not sufficiently addressing the issue of hate speech and the issue of hate speech remains very debatable.

HATE SPEECH IN HETEROGENEOUS SOCIETY

According to Mengistu (2012), history has the power to structure and affect relative supremacy of specific groups in community. We can see for instance the history of slavery, apartheid, holocaust, and ethnic marginalization.

Therefore, hate speech is always context based in history and other power structures and thus exists within these historical and social circumstances. This also results in supremacy of one group over the other, which ends up with different structural inequalities. Mengistu claims that in a heterogeneous society understanding these issues is very vital as hate speech discourse can initiate different types of violence among diverse societies.

In addition to Meggistu (2012) and Gagliardone, et al. (2014) reviled that in a divided society hate speech has the power to initiate mass violence and propagating hateful speeches against race, ethnicity and groups can victimize, marginalize, persecute and finally lead to mass executions. The drastic Rwandan genocide in 1994 is one example of this oppression, which was caused by the hate speech propagated through local radio. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the role of media in disseminating hate speech in divided societies. To this end, UN notified that the media hate speech holds the encouragement to genocide which is ´crimes against humanity´. Therefore, considering the historical, social contexts as well as mass media effect in propagation of hate speech is very crucial. The hate speech contents from media outlets should have censorship to protect minority groups (Gagliardone, et al., 2014).

INTRODUCTION OF INTERNET AND THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ETHIOPIA

According to Atnafu (2014) internet connection in Ethiopia was introduced in 1997. Though to begin with not even more than one thousand, the number of internet subscribers crossed 2068 just in one year showing an increase of 98.5 per cent. Government records show the development of internet is growing by 20 per cent annually. Alemayehu (2013) in his study noted reviled that the internet subscribers that were 6,677,903 in 2010 increased to 43.8 million in 2013.

According to Alemayehu, the growth development of internet users and introduction of different mobile technologies have contributed a lot in intensifying different social media platforms in Ethiopia. The people of Ethiopia young to adult, from politician to academician and ordinary people all use these platforms.

Ethiopian people use diverse social media platforms but Facebook is the most dominant. According to the report of Internet World States (2016) Ethiopia has more than four million Facebbok users with the penetration rate of 4.3 per cent. According to Negussie and Ketema (2014) the popularity and usage of social media in Ethiopia is increasing time to time and hence the way of using social media is changing gradually from posting, tweeting or sharing things to critically debating political, economic and social conditions.

FACEBOOK AND HATE SPEECH

Senior Ethiopian government officials and numerous authors affirm there is growth of online hate speech in Ethiopia since last couple of years (Negussie and Ketema, 2014). Internet World States (2016) report also demonstrates that among other online networking outlets Facebook is the predominant one utilization in Ethiopia. More than four million individuals utilize Facebook in Ethiopia. This addition of the clients every now and then is changing the methods for association essentially from posting, tweeting or sharing things to fundamentally debating political, economic, social and other outrageous conditions. Facebook and other web-based social networking outlets are thus turning into a frame for various open debates.

This researcher conducted interviews to find out the role of Facebook in catalyzing hate speech with different persons. Many of them believed that Facebook has a part in intensifying and catalyzing online hate speech in Ethiopia. It is facilitating the discourse of hateful contents and creating ethnic tensions among different ethnicities. To this concern, a political activist who wanted anonymity asserted that Facebook is contributing a great deal to the extension of hate speech in Ethiopia. Hence, he clearly stated: "…Facebook has become place for our uninsured and very individual ideas to post. Facebook users participate by reacting, commenting, and sharing. We don't check the source for hate word that is posted on Facebook; simply we react on it and we continue to add another hate word in addition to the first one. This does not end here; we share it with our friends and public. In this manner the role of Facebook and in general the role of Social Media in the expansion of hate speech in Ethiopia is exponential".

This way we find that the features of Facebook itself are adding to the extension of hate speech since Facebook can spread information fastest to an exceptionally varied and extensive groups of users. This encourages the hate speech to arrest the victims or supporters of the hate engineered or discharged by the person who posts on the Facebook divider.

Hayalu Godifay a vibrant and active activist, blogger, a columnist in Sergen Magazine, and Lecturer in Public University, though agreeing Facebook is facilitating the discourse of hate speech in an accelerated manner in Ethiopia, puts the blame on the user's character, their irresponsible and unhealthy characters: "They always post hateful contents that can potentially destroy the sense of tolerance and diversity rather than posting something which builds the sense of togetherness". Hayalu also attributed it lack of awareness and know-how about the consequences of hate speech since the coming of Facebook is a recent phenomena in Ethiopia.

Supporting Hayalu's argument, Mengistu Gebremedhin from Mekelle University Department of Journalism and Communication articulated: "… Most Ethiopian Facebook users are too young to weigh things from different perspectives and form their own opinion. This creates an opportunity for some extremists to spread hatred and mobilize users to advance their evil agenda".

Obviously, political extremists are using Facebook as a tool of communication to spread hateful contents. One blogger and activist showed that the role of Facebook in facilitating hate speech in Ethiopia is un-ignorable. According to him: "Facebook has been an uncontrolled platform in which people are expressing their every grievance in the country. As every single issue is being politicized, hate speech in the form of attacking a particular ethnic identity remains central to it. You may not know whether the user is using his real name as it is very difficult to trace who that particular user is, this platform provides everyone the opportunity to abuse others as they wish. This has been very common in Ethiopia. The number of people using this platform has been growing very fast in the last few years. Hate speeches which are very much taboos are now becoming common with hardly any one to control them".

According to this interviewee this is because everyone can access those 'bad words' and users post in a second and respond to it without any constraint. This develops to a large extent when users identifying themselves to a particular ethnic line join to defend themselves or respond in the same way as the other group does. So, the catalyzing role of Facebook is enormous here.

Ethiopian Government also believes that social media encounters aggravating the pace of hate speech and affecting the country's development path. Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn Speaking before United Nations General Assembly (2016) in New York said: "The populists, political and religious extremists are exploiting the genuine concerns of the people and spreading racism and hatred through social media. This is hampering the progress of the countries like our's who are working very hard to escape from poverty" (Yilma, 2017). Girmay Ghezahagn a member of the opposition party in late eighties and currently an active diaspora activist said there has been an alarming spread of hate speech in social media essentially on Facebook platform during the last two years in Ethiopia. "Most common in this is the use of alias name. No one knows the real identity of the individual / individuals posting comments on Facebook. Ethiopian Facebook users are increasingly becoming self-destructive, guided by emotions instead of reason", he said.

The other issue Girmay raised during the interview is that most of the highly educated Ethiopians are part and parcel of hate speech. According to him Facebook is becoming increasingly destructive media in Ethiopian context; 99 per cent of the discussion among Ethiopians has to do direct and indirect with Ethiopian politics. Most Facebook users are using this medium as a means to vent their individual or group anger. Save a few enlightened sayings, on Facebook not much of substance is being entertained. Group hate is the dominant subject, laments Girmay.

According to Alemayehu (2013) anonymity is one of the basic problems in different political, economic and social discussions on Facebook. It is the source of fake and unreliable information since the users tend to post hateful and fake contents on Facebook. Fake accounts, fake names or fake identity is another issue on Facebook. Hence, the way Facebook allows its users to use itself has a basic role in catalyzing hate speech in Ethiopia.

A journalist working for Radio Dimtse Woyane Tigray claimed Facebook account names are mostly fictitious; it is difficult to trace their real name and status. Both the opposition and the government supporters use disgusting words against each other. Fissuh Hailu in his interview claimed: "After we have witnessed what has happened in recent years in Ethiopia, especially during wide range violent demonstrations across the Oromia regions, it is fair to say that Facebook has played a big role in spreading hate speeches among relatively educated young people as well as the illiterates. I believe that Facebook has the biggest role in connecting the Diaspora Ethiopians who claim to be political activists and the local population who indirectly or directly participated in the violent activities across the Oromia region and part of Amhara region".

Mahari Yohannes from Mekelle University Political Science and Strategic Studies Department and an effervescent activist and blogger said that in recent times Facebook is contributing to the expansion of hate speech in Ethiopia because of the polarized political situation inside the country. In Ethiopia, there is no consensus on nation building and the politics is zero sum game. Facebook as highly uncontrolled media is fueling this gap. Many from within and from outside the country are sharing hateful writings and videos. During the last couple of years, many of the instabilities were instigated and catalyzed by Facebook. Many have written a lot of lies and hate speeches on Facebook.

The active Amahara Activist Ayalew Menbera said: "Ethnic politics by itself uses differences as a means to achieve its goal. So those who believe that they are superior or inferior used all means to express their feeling by using a fake account or even in their own name. Others who think that they are targeted are trying to respond in the same way. Hence social media is a new media with no concrete ethics and law where anyone can abuse the media".

According to a medical doctor Dr. Ztseat, a dynamic political activist, and a blogger, Facebook has an instrumental role in intensifying hate speech in Ethiopia since last couple of years. He claims: "Facebook has become an effective tool for hate-mongers to spread their hate messages. There are Ethiopian politicians who at any cost would like to

get back the power and the supremacy they lost three decades back. They have been working for quite long to alienate Ethnic Tegaru by creating an impression that the party in power is Tegarus' and every wrong doing that the ruling party carries out is because of Tegarus and that Tegarus are getting a discriminating advantage. Facebook has helped a lot in imprinting this image in readers' mind".
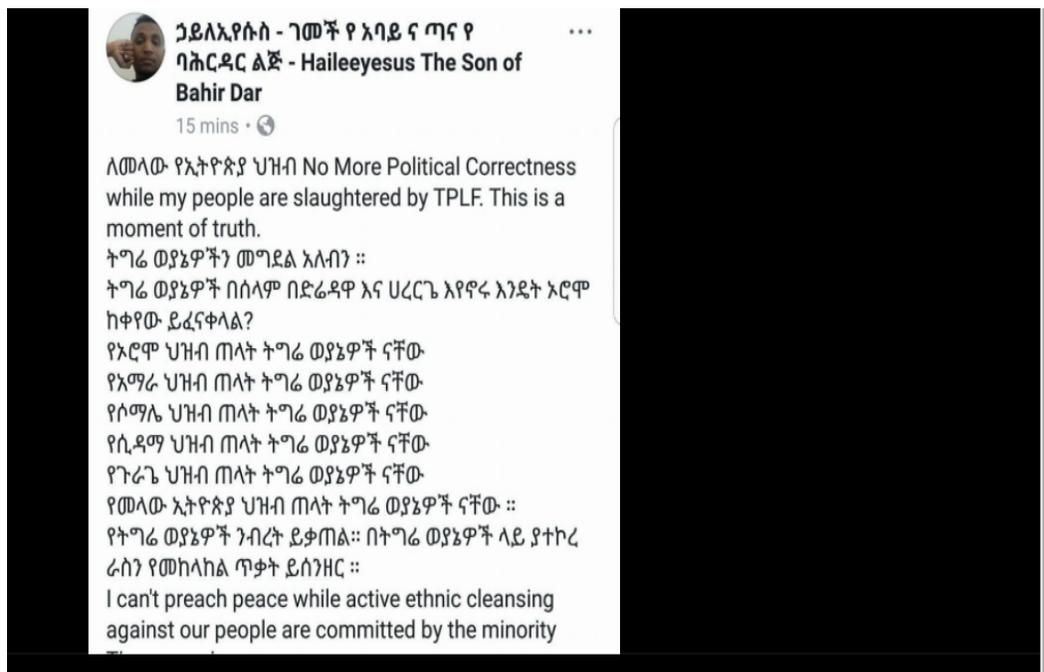
Source; (OTNAA, 2017).

This researcher has reproduced the above picture planted on Facebook. It tells that the Tigrians are the only enemy of all ethnicities in Ethiopia. It shows that the enemy of Oromos, Amharas, Somalis, Sedamas, Guragies are Tigrians. So "we have to kill Woyane Tegarus".

CONCLUSION

This study finds that Facebook does facilitate and becomes a safe haven for individuals, groups and extremists who intend to post even toxic ideas. This is because there is little provision to check or disallow ill intended posts that create ethnic tensions. People also do not check the source of the message; they just react to it either for support or for objection. At times, respondents even aggravate the matters by adding another hate word. Thus though unintended, Facebook plays substantial role in catalyzing hate speech. Facebook potential of speedy dissemination of all communications to varied groups of onlookers and readers adds wings to an ill intended post.

Facebook system being faceless, entertains all irrespective of t heir background. From Ethiopian perspective beside some educated active people, there are also many who lack awareness and know-how about the consequences of hate speech. Facebook in Ethiopia barely a few years old, many tend to post hate speech on Facebook platform. Besides, Facebook being an uncontrolled platform, whenever any issue is politicized, hate speech in the form of attacking a particular ethnic identity gets in forefront. Facebook features such as anonymity, ease in having fake accounts, names, and identity intensify / facilitate the discourse of hate speech as these features help abusers go undetected and unpunished.

The other aspect identified by this study is that Diaspora Ethiopian political activists with interest to destabilize the country, abuse Facebook features for getting speedy and vast audience connectivity. This happened during the Oromo and Amhara protests during the last few years when these people used Facebok as their medium to spread hate speech among different ethnicities. As the Ethiopian politics is much polarized and there is little consensus on building the nation, Facebook as an uncontrolled media happens to add fuel to this gap.

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