CHAPTER 1

Transforming Media and Conflict Research

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There are unprecedented efforts underway to connect the unconnected, many of whom live in conflict-affected rural environments. The UN's Agenda for Sustainable Development outlines the goals that all countries should adopt for addressing global poverty and peace over the next fifteen years, including a commitment to provide internet connectivity to all by 2020 (United Nations n.d.). While it seems clear that this goal will not be met, ambitious experiments are underway. Western corporations are attempting to lead the efforts – Google is experimenting with drones and hot air balloons, what it has termed 'project loon'. The balloons are currently in a first commercial trial in rural, mountainous communities in Kenya, where it would be expensive to build infrastructure on the ground. Elon Musk's SpaceX has deployed the first batch of what is expected to include tens of thousands of satellites he hopes will provide global internet coverage from space by flying in a low orbit above earth. Facebook has recently announced a plan to build underwater sea cables – a project dubbed 'Simba' after the Disney film *The Lion King* – around the continent (such a title is unlikely to dispel concerns that these efforts are part of a new form of colonisation). Access is expected to be offered on an open-access basis and is partly motivated by an effort to extend the reach of Free Basics (a Facebook service that links with local telecoms carriers and provides people with free access to Facebook and certain websites) and associated products. With markets in North America and Europe nearly saturated, the developing world, and Africa in particular, offers the growth market for the next billion users. But there has been little discussion about what kind of impact these technologies will have on

conflict-affected societies. Comments by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, when he was in Colombia for the launch of internet.org (the predecessor to Free Basics), reflect this gap when he suggested that the internet will open new spaces for dialogue, including between the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC rebels) who were leading a guerrilla war from 1964 to 2017 in Colombia: 'I think a lot of conflicts are caused by misunderstandings. The internet as a whole and social media will bring reconciliation and peace' ('Facebook Founder in Colombia to Promote Affordable Internet' 2015). Similar to many of Africa's protracted violent conflicts, violence in Colombia has been driven by a complex network of interests (economic, ideological, political, etc.) rather than simply a lack of dialogue. While there is growing attention to the role of fake news and the manipulation of media content around elections (particularly in rich democracies), there is an urgent need for a deeper understanding of the interaction between social media and violent conflict, or peace-making efforts, as the contributions to this volume show.

In the United States and across much of Europe, citizens are becoming more vocal in their criticism of large technology companies, asking, for example, whether Facebook is 'breaking democracy' or whether it is actually undermining informed political participation ('Do Social Media Threaten Democracy?' 2017; Lovink 2011; Morozov 2012, 2013). There is a growing acceptability that in certain circumstances, it might be useful, if not necessary, to shut down social media as part of a broader effort to disrupt protests or interrupt terrorist attacks. While the U.K. government has been an outspoken critic of internet shutdowns as are often employed in much of Asia and Latin America, there was little criticism around the British Transport Police's recent effort to interrupt climate change protests by shutting off internet access on the London Tube in April 2019. This was a far more isolated incident than a nationwide shutdown, but it reflects an increased willingness to see social media disruption as a tool for managing both present and potential conflicts.

International focus on the potentially destabilising effects of social media has been far more muted in poorer countries and places that are deeply affected by violent conflict. Only recently, for example, has debate broadened on the role of social media in violence in Myanmar, and pressure has been increased on companies such as Facebook that are providing the platforms on which such speech occurs to address it. The Chairman of the UN Independent

International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar noted that Facebook has played a ‘determining role’ in the violence against the Rohingya (‘U.N. Investigators Cite Facebook Role in Myanmar Crisis’ 2018). This is despite many earlier and repeated warnings by academics and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) about the growing role of dangerous speech (Gagliardone et al. 2015; ‘Myanmar Activists Launch Anti-“Hate Speech” Campaign’ 2014). However, it has really only been in the wake of the ‘fake news’ scandal in the United States that pressure on U.S. companies has increased to address this issue (albeit very slowly). Social media companies such as Facebook have invested significant funding in human moderators and artificial intelligence (AI) as part of an effort to remove false information that could lead to physical violence. But success has been elusive and, given the scale, the varying political and cultural contexts, and evolving technology, it is unclear whether such speech can be curbed on social media platforms. How exactly this will be implemented is unclear.

Many of the world’s most significantly conflict-affected regions are in Africa and are a priority area for these companies’ planned expansions. This chapter explores a few of the potential challenges and implications of these largescale technology projects to connect more rural communities in the developing world, drawing on extensive research I have conducted in the Horn of Africa to illustrate these challenges.[1] The Horn of Africa is a unique research site due to its variable communications environment – from the restrictive internet and media in Ethiopia to the far more liberal and innovative information and communications technology (ICT) environment in neighbouring Somalia. The region as a whole has suffered from continued violence raising important issues about the complex relationship between media and conflict.

This chapter is by no means a comprehensive analysis, but rather highlights a few key areas at the transnational, national and local levels.[2] Rather than pursuing a deterministic approach focusing on the potentially liberating (Diamond and Plattner 2012; Shirky 2011) or peace-making (Loewenberg 2006; Paluck 2009; Paluck and Green 2009; Stauffacher et al. 2005) effects of social media, the chapter focuses on what types of questions might lead to alternative ways of understanding, how these experiments with internet expansion can be understood and the particular challenges conflict-affected markets pose. Within each of these three broad areas – the international (or transnational), the national and the local – one specific issue

or angle is raised to offer a view to elevate issues that are often overlooked.

The strategies and role of transnational actors, and particularly companies such as Facebook and Google, to extend the internet is considered first. The current efforts to ‘connect the unconnected’ differ from earlier efforts to extend connectivity to Africa. Initiatives such as the African Marine System, an ongoing effort to connect the continent through submarine fibre optics, is indicative; cables usually go to the densest and richest markets first, where providers are most likely to recover their costs, whereas current strategies are focusing on rural communities. Many of the current efforts focus on rural regions that are also some of the most conflict-affected areas of the continent where infrastructure has been difficult to put in place and the margins of profit are slim for telecommunications companies. But these initiatives are usually driven with little consideration of the context in which they are operating, or how their platform might be interpreted or used in ways that were not intended.

The chapter then proceeds to examine the national, including national debates about information systems in conflict and post-conflict situations. It focuses on the challenge of how to move beyond normative debates around national media policy that typically focus on legal processes and associated political reforms. At present, there is an overwhelming focus on what the state should be doing and how it falls short of international standards. An alternative approach emphasises the importance of ideas, ideology and the national vision of the type of society governments and political leaders are attempting to craft.

And, finally, community-level strategies of innovation and regulating speech are considered. The importance of this analysis is often clearest in spaces, frequently rural, where the state might not be present or might have limited reach. This is particularly relevant as many of the current initiatives by large multinational companies to connect the unconnected focus on such regions. It also highlights just how challenging it is to marry global policies and ‘community standards’ (as often termed by social media companies) with very particular local realities, whether it is about what is hate speech or whether certain speech constitutes incitement to violence.

International Interventions and the Provision of

Communications Infrastructure in Conflict-Affected Regions

There is a substantial history of international organisations and various aid agencies providing communications infrastructure, supporting media outlets and developing programming for conflict-affected regions (Price and Thompson 2002). The beginnings of this approach can be seen in a range of interventions, from supporting the media apparatuses of guerrilla insurgencies in Africa, to providing equipment and training of journalists, to developing language programming and broadcasting by stations such as the BBC World Service or Voice of America to advance foreign affairs priorities and support certain values (and consequently parties) in conflict situations (Allen and Seaton 1999; Lewis 2002: 301–2). More recently, the UN has established an active communications sector that often partners peacekeeping operations with media, typically radios, that support the funders' objectives. UN peacekeeping missions all have a Public Information Office that often comprises a media relations unit, a photography unit and a radio unit, among others, with the objective of both providing information about the operation and engaging with 'influencers', including local journalists, the military and policy-makers. Radio Okapi, for example, which started in the Democratic Republic of Congo, is often cited as one of the more successful 'peace radios' (Betz 2004), although there have been others with varying impact, including Radio Miraya in South Sudan, UNMIL (United Nations Mission in Liberia) Radio in Liberia and Radio Barkulan in Somalia, broadcasting in collaboration with the African Union (Orme 2010). The World Bank has also been deeply involved in the provision of communications infrastructure in conflict-affected regions. In Somalia, for example, it has invested tens of millions of dollars in projects that include building infrastructure to support government ministries and education resource networking that are all part of trying to build a viable state and empower the government to provide security and services (and, as a consequence, increase its legitimacy). A priority has been on developing legal and regulatory frameworks for the flourishing telecommunications sector that has, so far, largely been operating entirely beyond state regulation ('Legal ICT Framework is Pivotal Moment for Somalia' 2017). A subsequent phase will focus on expanding connectivity and access from coastal areas to the interior (ICT Sector Support in Somalia Phase II 2018).

While there are certainly limits to these types of interventions by

international organisations, and the effectiveness of such media development interventions can also be questioned, particularly in conflict situations (Schoemaker and Stremlau 2014), there is even less understanding or research on the growing role of companies such as Facebook and Google in conflict-affected regions, particularly in Africa.[3] However, what does seem evident is that while tech companies have become increasingly responsive (although still surprisingly slow) to respond to complaints and inquiries by Western governments into the use and abuse of their platform, whether around hate speech in Germany or fake news and manipulation by the Russian government in the United States, they have been even slower to respond to cases outside of rich countries (Roose 2017). And the response, or preventative measures have often been erratic or splotchy, lacking a coherent strategy.

For example, Facebook appears to have been comparatively engaged and aggressive in addressing the potential of hate speech and fake news on its platform during the Kenyan elections in 2017. These elections were tense and widely watched across the world as previous elections been associated with significant violence and media had a role in inflaming tensions (Stremlau and Price 2009). Facebook attempted different strategies to raise awareness in Kenya, including taking out full-page ads in local newspapers informing readers about how to identify false news online and enabling mechanisms for users to report, and counter, such news, along with existing measures to identify hate speech or incitement to violence (Hume 2017). But this type of pre-emptive approach has not been adopted across the continent where there has been a real threat of violence or where the platform has been associated with hate speech and violence. The last elections in Ethiopia (2015), for example, as well as ongoing violence in the Oromia region, did not elicit engagement from Facebook, despite the fact that the Ethiopian government has long cited the use of incitement on the platforms as a reason for widespread internet shutdowns and monitoring of social media (Gagliardone et al. 2016; Karanja, Xynou and Filastò 2016). Facebook Live has exploded in popularity within the Somali territories, building on Somalis' strong tradition of orality, but at the same time it has rapidly become a platform for hateful political rhetoric that is difficult to monitor, flag and take down.

The challenge is that as social media companies increasingly focus on rural communities, they are reaching out to individuals that are often first-time internet users, with limited media literacy. How this technology will be

used, and interpreted, in very different contexts cannot be assumed. Technology companies have often been quick to argue that their platforms are ‘neutral’ or that they are not media companies (with the associated responsibilities of being a publisher) (Segreti 2016), but there can be significant differences in how users assess, understand and critically analyse the type of misinformation, and even what might be accurate information on social media (Stremlau, Gagliardone and Price 2018; see also Marshall, this volume). While there is a lack of bottom-up research from rural and conflict-affected communities in Sub-Saharan Africa on how people are understanding information on social media, some of the research on more traditional media, including radio and television, particularly by anthropologists, offers some insight into the complexity of interpreting information through different mediums, particularly around elections. The use of radio in Ethiopia’s last competitive elections illustrates this challenge.

In the run-up to the 2005 elections in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) opened the media space and allowed an unprecedented level of debate in what has been one of the most restrictive countries on the continent. Political parties were allocated airtime in a relatively balanced and transparent process, and coverage of opposition rallies, interviews and manifestos was even included on government media (Stremlau 2011). In a country that was long dominated by media sympathetic to the government, the inclusion of opposition voices on government media was highly unusual. The impact of providing these opposing political parties with increased access to the mainstream media was more significant than the ruling party anticipated, particularly in rural areas. With the handful of private radio stations restricted to music and entertainment, and unable to air news or debates, the freedoms the private press enjoyed had a limited impact among the literate and those wealthy enough to buy newspapers in urban areas. The reach of government radio and the unprecedented airing of opposition views and political debates challenged expectations in rural communities and perceptions of Ethiopia’s long-established hierarchical political culture (Stremlau 2011). It was not so much the content or substance of the debates that affected how people voted, but the fact that, as Lefort (2007: 265) argued, people now perceived the government to be ‘so weak that it must sit with its enemies’. For rural audiences that had not been exposed to similar political debates, hearing the government openly criticised and mocked on national radio, with little response or crackdown from the

government as was the case in the past, suggested that the government was too weak to respond. Within some communities, this was seen as a signal that the government was soon to fall and that a new leadership would take over. From the farmers' perspectives, they did not want be on the wrong side of a collapsing government, so they gave their allegiance and support to those that they perceived were stronger (Lefort 2007). Furthermore, in a highly polarised political space, the ruling party believed not only that it had total control of security and politics, but that the opposition was too fragmented and weak to offer an alternative to 'revolutionary democracy' in such a diverse and complex state. Given this assessment, the ruling party did not develop a serious campaign agenda, but (even more counterproductively) it followed its usual approach of refusing to respond to or engage with the criticism and debates that were emerging from the increasingly vibrant media. After the results became public and it became clear that the opposition had made significant gains in Parliament, the government contested the results, leading to widespread protests that soon turned violent. The government partially attributed this violence to the inflammatory role of the media, and the use of social media and SMS to mobilise protesters (Stremlau 2011), but the most significant aspect was likely, as Lefort described, a clash of expectations and misperceptions about the political process that was enhanced by the unprecedented use of radio in the country. There was a speedy reversal of political and media freedoms, with SMS messaging closed down for more than a year and journalists and politicians arrested, and tens of thousands of citizens were imprisoned throughout the post-election period.

The intersection between media and politics in Ethiopia's elections highlights the often unexpected or unanticipated effects of media, particularly in communities that have not had previous exposure to a particular media or forum. This is not to be deterministic, but rather suggests the challenges in understanding how technologies and messages might be understood in very different contexts with communities that may have varying interpretations and expectations of these technologies (this has also been explored through some of the literature on technopolitics; see e.g. Gagliardone 2016). This potential for unintended consequences is often overlooked. Just as the Ethiopian government did not anticipate that allowing the opposition time on the radio would lead some listeners to believe that the government was falling, the discourse from tech companies planning these large expansions of their platforms and products is uniformly optimistic and, in this case, based

on an assumption that these products and their broader efforts to ‘connect the unconnected’ will offer neutral platforms that will in turn be constructive in fostering ‘meaningful communities’ that will engage in positive change (Zuckerberg 2018).

National Politics and Ideologies

Particularly when it comes to the national level and national debates, a challenge for those working in the international development or conflict resolution field, and engaging with media policy issues, is how to move beyond the normative free expression agenda that tends to place an overwhelming focus on what the state should be doing, how it should be performing and where it is falling short of international standards, particularly in relation to democratisation or freedom of expression (see also Oldenburg, this volume). It is in this context that the deep ethnographic work on media and conflict illuminated in this book can offer alternative perspectives.

This bias towards the state is rooted in media policy debates, which tend to follow democracy promotion efforts focusing on the legal environment, support for civil society, and political reforms such as elections (Bridoux and Kurki 2014). This focus on the state is also the grounding for most large-scale comparative analyses, whether in comparative media studies (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995; Eribo and Jong-Ebot 1997; Hallin and Mancini 2011) or media freedom indexes (Freedom House, 2017), or the World Bank Governance Indicators, which also has a key strand on media and information. But this emphasis can also obscure understandings, for example, of why governments or political leaders adopt particular policies in relation to media and what the motivations and political ideas that inform such approaches are.

Much of the public debate on media and conflict issues in Africa is centred on the growing ‘internet shutdowns’ debate. There has been a dramatic increase in governments completely shutting down the internet, often in the name of conflict prevention or in response to violent (or even nonviolent) protests. Election periods are a particularly sensitive time and preserving the integrity of the electoral process, or maintaining national

security, is often used as a justification. The brazenness to close the internet at a national level contrasts with many other countries in Asia and the Middle East, where the shutdown of the internet tends to be limited to particular regions or cities.[4]

At the time of writing, public debates around internet shutdowns in Africa are driven by activists and advocacy groups such as Access Now and the #KeepItOn campaign promoted on Twitter, which, as their names suggest, campaign against internet shutdowns and on related freedom of expression and digital rights issues such as improving access. These activists (including NGOs in the Global North, along with their partner local NGOs and technology advocates) are raising awareness of the issue, but their narrative is largely limited to suggesting that 'autocratic' governments are shutting down the internet and they should keep it on because it is a 'right' (UN General Assembly 2016)and it has economic consequences (West 2016). This approach has proved highly limiting. While galvanising activists, it has the alternative effect of closing down dialogue and efforts to engage with, or evaluate, the concerns or claims from policy-makers justifying the closures, particularly in the context of growing frustration with the seeming inability of large tech companies to effectively address issues of extreme speech on their platforms. While in most cases governments cite little evidence to support such drastic measures, there is also an absence of evidence about the effects of closures in limiting the phenomenon that they are attempting to control, such as stopping the spread of rumours, false news or incitement of violence (Freyburg and Garbe 2018).

An alternative approach to understanding national media policy in conflict situations also requires a greater focus on political ideology. This is an area that much of the research on media in conflict situations has often overlooked, but the conflict or political science literature has engaged with more fully (e.g. Clapham 1998; Sikkink 1991). While much of this research on Africa has tended to remain on the peripheries, some research programmes have sought to emphasise the importance of engaging with the nuances of contexts, including understanding of the role of political ideology and various political authorities (Africa Power and Politics (APPP) 2018; Pettit 2013). This perspective is less focused on extremist ideology (as is often commonly assumed), but rather on political ideology about how leaders, governments and local authorities are thinking about the role of information and security. Understanding this requires a highly contextual and

historical approach, and one that is often provided by anthropologists.

Again, returning to the case of contemporary Ethiopia, it is almost impossible to understand the government's reaction, as well as proactive measures, to the use of social media during current conflicts without examining how information and media was used during the guerrilla struggle between the 1970s and the early 1990s. Accounting for these historical roots and, if one wishes to go even further, the ways in which ideology was crafted during the student movement in the 1960s is an essential part of interpreting how contemporary media policy has been shaped in Ethiopia. The central and distinctive role of ideology in governance in Ethiopia led to increasing political polarisation during the first twenty years of EPRDF leadership. Heavily influenced by leaders such as Mao, Lenin and Marx, the Tigreyan People's Liberation Front, the core of guerrilla fighters that fought against the Soviet-backed government and later formed the current ruling party (the EPRDF), was deeply committed to the political education of their cadres and peasantry. While this evolved over the decades, the unique approach was reinforced during the leadership of the first Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, in what became known as 'Revolutionary Democracy' and, subsequently, the 'Developmental Democratic State' (Stremlau 2018b). According to Donald Kaberuka, the former President of the African Development Bank, this approach has served as 'another form of governance model for leaders in Africa to emulate' (as quoted in Kwibuka 2015) and it has been given prominence by influential leaders such as Paul Kagame of Rwanda.

The approach of the developmental democratic state is evident in media policies ranging from the reluctance of the EPRDF to extend the state's monopoly of telecommunications to private companies to ambitious projects like WoredaNet and SchoolNet. These large-scale projects, the first which establishes a link between the central government and local regional governments (*woredas*) via satellite video conferencing to enable one-way political education (from the central government to the *woredas*) and the latter that relies on a similar satellite video system while focusing on the political education of high school students, both attempt to extend the power of the central government to the peripheries (Gagliardone 2016). These projects have been in response to the challenges of governing a highly fragmented and diverse society, and one that has embedded into the constitution some of the most ambitious laws on federalism, enabling any region to vote for secession in theory but not in practice (as evidenced by the

continuing regional and secessionist struggles in the Ogaden and Oromo regions; see Turton 2006).

The point is that, like the internet shutdown campaigns, the role of political thought and ideology when it comes to how media is used during conflict is often neglected. And similarly overlooked are the politics that are so often embedded in the technologies and policies. If there is a desire by international actors, as there often is, to intervene or develop ways of mitigating violence, or to challenge a government response, towards media and information during conflict, understanding it through the specific experiences and the lens of those in power is crucial. This includes taking role of ideas and ideology seriously, and engaging with the arguments that governments might be making justifying policies or approaches.

Customary Mechanisms for Regulating Speech During Conflict

As this volume argues, and other chapters empirically demonstrate, there needs to be a more grounded approach to understanding media and conflict. This is particularly complex because in many conflict-affected regions, it likely means understanding spaces where the state might not be present or might have limited reach. This is especially important as the current efforts to improve access to the internet focus on rural areas. Research on hybrid governance (Booth 2011; Meagher 2012) and on public authorities, particularly in regions where the state may just be one authority among many (Hagmann and Hoehne 2009; Lund 2006), provides some insight into how such an approach might be structured. The experience and role of customary law in regulating voice and resolving media disputes is instructive in illuminating the importance of an alternative strategy of analysis. Perhaps nowhere is the role of customary law more central than in conflict regions such as Somalia, which has been without a functioning central state for more than two decades. Similar arguments could likely be made for other war-affected regions with strong traditional authorities, such as Yemen and Afghanistan.

One of the most extraordinary aspects of the Somali conflict is the extent to which telecommunications and media have managed to grow and innovate despite the instability and absence of a capable national government. Media

have been entwined with the ongoing violence; over the years, there have been dozens of radios that have been advocating for particular warlords, diaspora satellite television stations are highly popular and political, and the UN/African Union established an ambitious radio station, Radio Bar Kulan, to support their troops and push their organisations' political agenda in the country (and it is one that is not without its critics and dissenters). One of the world's most advanced experiments in mobile money has also emerged in Somalia, and the country enjoys relatively fast and inexpensive access to the internet as a result of a highly competitive telecoms market. This poses the important question of how media has developed in such a context that in many ways is the antithesis of the generally accepted 'enabling environment' for supporting the development of 'free' media (Price and Krug 2000). What has facilitated, and even encouraged, investment in infrastructure and local businesses, despite weak security, a lack of government protections and regulations? The prevailing approach by international development actors is to look at what is *not* working and suggest reforms – new media laws, training of journalists in international standards, and new associations to support media organisations.[5] Looking at what *is* actually working, and asking why, is seldom considered. In the case of Somalia, while the state may have limited reach, there is a strong historical precedent of *xeer* law regulating speech, addressing concerns of slander or incitement to violence, and protecting property (van Notten 2005). As the introduction to this volume indicates, legal anthropologists have long argued that there is a certain logic or pattern to conflict; it is not structureless or simply chaos. And a similar argument can be made about how disputes regarding the role of media, or voice, during conflict where the state has limited reach might be regulated.

The continued relevance and role of *xeer* law and shari'a in Somalia is debated, with some arguing that, particularly with *xeer* law, there has been a tendency to romanticise or overstate its role in peacebuilding or maintaining justice and order (especially in the Western sense of the term) (Schlee 2013). *Xeer* law is comprised of bilateral agreements between clans (family groupings); it is not codified, but based on precedent and, as a consequence, works in varying ways across the Somali territories and diaspora, with greater relevancy in some communities than others. In Somaliland (the self-declared independent region in the north), for example, *xeer* law is more influential and widely used than in the south, partly because the British, who colonised the north, did not dismantle local structures of governance to the same extent

as the Italian colonisers in the south. And the north has also had far less of the relentless violence that has plagued the south, including the associated international interventions and various attempts at establishing a government. These processes of peace-making have often sought to co-opt local elders who are central to adjudicating disputes. Furthermore, as a form of a pact between clans, *xeer* law inevitably empowers certain clans (including those that are larger, wealthier and more politically influential), while marginalising others. Despite these imbalances and however variable it is, *xeer* law has had a continued role in regulating the media sector and different principles are drawn upon depending on the nature of the dispute (Stremlau and Osman 2015).

When it comes to regulating libel and slander in Somalia with *xeer* law, poetry offers a precedent and provides some case law for disputes involving mass media and new communications technologies. Such offences are taken very seriously; reputation is extremely important, almost a currency, and is regarded as an essential component of trust and order. Both sides of a dispute are typically eager to resolve conflict to maintain the reputation of a clan member and of the clan as a whole. There are limits to this approach. In some cases, the person who committed an offence is known as a wayward family member and others are reluctant to weigh in on their behalf, and similarly elders may be reluctant to judge a repeat offender. It may also be that an individual or a clan will not recognise the legitimacy or authority of the traditional elders. Some of the most popular media outlets are diverse and transnational, with journalists in the diaspora, and are not always constituted along clan lines. In previous cases involving the mass media, outlets have tried to argue that they represent a larger community and have pressed for the dispute to be heard in the court system (which is also seen as far more corruptible; see e.g. the case of Yusuf Gabobe, editor of *Haatuf* newspaper, and former President Riyaale in Stremlau 2012).

When it comes to enabling investment in the telecommunications sector and infrastructure in particular, *xeer* has provided a foundation for protecting and resolving property disputes, an essential enabler for international (almost exclusively diaspora) investment. Given the newness of ICTs and many media platforms, there is not necessarily precedent within *xeer* for adjudicating such disputes, but it can provide direction by considering how other property disputes have been resolved, particularly around livestock (Little 2003). The experience of regulating other, more traditional, sectors

can be applied to telecommunications infrastructure and demonstrates its continued relevance. Clans are traditionally responsible for providing security and support for pastoralists. In the context of telecoms infrastructure, companies are often careful to employ people on the basis of clan affiliation in order to ensure that their property and interests will be protected in the same way that they would be if the owner was from the local clan; this also ensures that a company will have sufficient access to local recourse in the case of disputes (Stremlau 2018a: 302).

As media policy and media law-making efforts intensify in Somalia, as part of the efforts to extend the influence and capacity of the weak Federal Government, there have been several large-scale initiatives, including an ambitious World Bank-sponsored Communications Act (2018), a new Media Law (2017) and intensive training efforts by the UN and other international organisations to promote freedom of expression. With the emphasis on encouraging the development of a Western-style media system, these initiatives almost entirely ignore the role of *xeer* law and the present practice of how disputes are resolved. The continued relevancy and applicability of *xeer* law in Somalia's media environment challenges the focus on the state, and its associated laws and policies, that prevailing indicators and frameworks relating to freedom of expression tend to adopt. This leads to overlooking more nuanced contexts for voice. Accounting for this highly varied legal and policy landscape, particularly in countries affected by conflict, is a crucial consideration in relation to how greater access to social media might intersect with conflicts.

Conclusion

This volume has called for more bottom-up approaches to understanding media and conflict, but developing and implementing such approaches, particularly when it comes to large-scale or comparative research, is difficult. Furthermore, capturing the significant divides, or variance, of media and the experience of conflict across a state, or even a community, makes generalisations about the role of media in conflict (and conflict on media) challenging.

At the same time, there is a clear pushback in some universities in the

Global South, as well as segments of academia further afield in the United States and the United Kingdom, to ‘decolonise’ or ‘transform’ curricula in order to make them more reflective of diverse viewpoints, including research from, and about, societies that have been marginalised (Mano 2009; Wa Thiong’o 1992). These debates, particularly in Africa, are longstanding and have gone through periods where they flourished and waned. The 1960s, as decolonisation movements swept across the continent, accompanied by vibrant media and literature, was arguably one such period. And there is a similar urgency to the present debates and movements as populism rises and many are questioning whether globalisation has been working in their favour or simply aiding the wealthy and powerful. The most recent wave has been spurred on by protests in 2015 at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, which became known as #Rhodesmustfall for the Twitter hashtag that mobilised students. Originally centred around calls for taking down a statue of Cecil Rhodes at the university, the protest spread to other campuses and broadened to include calls for debate on racial transformation (and white privilege in particular), curriculum transformation (with a focus on de-Westernisation) and free access to university. This movement spread abroad, sparking debates at the University of Oxford (which had its own Cecil Rhodes statue) and the United States, where buildings at rich universities have often been named after their benefactors, despite their controversial history and source of the wealth, for example, as slave owners.

These calls to decolonise or ‘internationalise’ (Thussu 2009) media studies, and academia more generally, highlight a critical gap relevant to the media and conflict field of research. The current discourse by Western companies around efforts to connect the unconnected in conflict situations follows the trend in much of the literature on media and conflict to focus on questions about what ‘outsiders’ or international interventions may be able to do to stop the inflammatory role of media; what can be done to rebuild or reconstruct media systems after violence (media development), again typically with international support; or analysing the way in which media have contributed to fuelling violence or how certain programmes (often on radio or television) can be used to bridge societal divides.[6]

As this chapter has suggested, there are several areas where more interdisciplinary and particularly ethnographic research can offer critical insights into the very significant anticipated changes, and possibly complex impact, that rapid expansion of the internet will have in conflict-affected

regions. A greater and more nuanced sensitivity on the part of both the technology companies and local public authorities to how technology will interact, including being reshaped or reinterpreted, is one aspect. As multinational companies take on unprecedented roles in providing the platforms for media and information, their involvement with critical issues relating to conflict, such as elections, remains underexamined, particularly in Africa. Greater attention to the variance of authorities in conflict situations, including the political ideologies and ways in which speech might be regulated beyond the state, will also support the development of more bottom-up approaches.

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Notes

1. This chapter draws on research that has been conducted by the author as part of the European Research Council ConflictNet project (grant agreement no. 716686). The author has undertaken extensive field research in Ethiopia, Kenya and the Somali territories. This chapter also takes forward findings from her field research that have been explored in *Media, Conflict and the State in Africa* (Stremlau 2018b), as well as various articles on Somalia that have been cited here.
2. The concept of ‘the local’, and what it means in research on peace and conflict, is contested. While the term has gained in prominence over the past decade, and organisations such as the World Bank and the UN often issue calls for greater local participation and input, it is often employed in a way that results in ‘selective glorification’, where certain aspects of what might be considered ‘local’ are decontextualised and idealised (Bräuchler and Naucke 2017: 432).
3. Facebook itself has acknowledged this and in April 2018 established an independent commission to study the effects of social media on democracy. This initiative is intended to be a new approach to partnerships between industry and academia (Schrage and Ginsberg 2018).
4. See e.g. the database on internet shutdowns around the world kept by Access Now (2018).
5. See e.g. the type of analysis produced by the National Union of Somali Journalists (2018).
6. The work by NGOs, such as Search for Common Ground (2018), is indicative of this type of approach.

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