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*Corresponding Author: Behailu Atinafu Dessie, Department of Journalism and Communication, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia
E-mail: behailuatinafu2014@gmail.com

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Towards ethno-political advocacy: Ethiopian journalists' professional role perceptions in post-EPRDF interregnum

Behailu Atinafu Dessie[1]*, Adem Chanie Ali[1] and Mulatu Alemayehu Moges[2]

Abstract: The study aims at investigating the interplay between the ethnic identity politics and journalists' role perceptions in contemporary Ethiopian media land-scape. Professional roles are a key topic in journalism research along with the fundamental elements in defining journalism as a profession because they suggest and provide insights about the environment surrounding the journalists. Based on the analytical model of journalism culture and social identity theory (SIT), the article draws on qualitative interviews of journalists from the perspective of six media channels along with media and communication scholars to argue that the country's ethno-political context shapes the media environment, which in turn influences how journalists perceive their roles. Accordingly, promoting ethno-centric identity and culture, becoming guardians and advocates for ethnic communities, mainstreaming the regional politics and hegemony, and considering themselves as struggle acti-vators and change agents were found to be the most remarkable institutional role perceptions of journalism in the current Ethiopian media system.

1. Introduction

Notwithstanding the recent development in the media industry, the journalistic practice in Ethiopian media landscape seems to be influenced by the new political dynamics of the country. Following the new environment of freedom of expression with the new political reform that took place in early April 2018, media polarization appears to have permeated the media channels along

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Behailu Atinafu Dessie (Ph.D.) is an assistant professor in Media and Communication Studies. Currently, he is working at Debre Tabor University, Ethiopia. His research interests are media and politics, political communication, the political economy of media, and media literacy. -
Adem Chanie Ali (Ph.D.) is an associate professor in the Department of Journalism and Communication at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. He has been engaged in development communication, media studies, and public relations research areas.
Mulatu Alemayehu Moges (Ph.D.) is an assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. His research interests focus on conflict reporting, media and political economy, media and ethnicity, and the digital media sphere.

Behailu Atinafu Dessie

ethnic lines in Ethiopia. In this light, Tamrat (2021) argues, the journalistic practice and professional role of the Ethiopian media tend to be guided by the ethno-political rivalries on one hand and the media are also characterized as triggering agents of conflict and ethnic division on the other hand. Addisu (2019) also points out that when the political discourse remains tense, frictions and hostility among the regional/ethnically affiliated media get escalated by politicizing the media environment along ethnic lines.

As a result, the commercial and regional state media channels' journalistic practice and professional roles seem to be influenced by political rivalries on the one hand, while the media are also labeled as triggering agents of conflict and division on the other. This new trend may take advantage of the current media landscape to create a new ethnic polarization. From these assertions, one might deduce that current Ethiopian journalism is influenced by a variety of factors, albeit further investigation is warranted. Concomitant to this argument, Gagliardone (2014, p. 19) contends, "In a society that is divided along ethnic and political lines, inter-communal divisions represent opportunities for different media outlets to thrive, each targeting its own audience and their grievances, with producing new value or healthy media environment".

All these may lead the country to more and more ethnic polarization, tension, suspicion, and division. In this vein, Zenebe (2012), witnesses in his finding that media contributed to both the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the 2007 post-election violence in Kenya. In addition, attacks and counter attacks among these media may also weaken the watchdog role of the media. In contrast to the EPRDF period media landscape, where regional and national media had essentially similar format and content under the concept of development journalism, this trend of ethnifying the media discourse appears to be a new occurrence (Menychle, 2020; Skjerdal & Moges, 2021). This phenomenon, among many factors, is believed to be attributed by the journalists' institutional role perceptions where ethnicity has become the overarching construct.

As long as journalism is defined as a profession, one of the criteria that may govern newsroom routines and media journalism cultures is regarded to be journalists' professional role perceptions. Many scholars in the field have come up with nearly identical definitions of the idea. According to Donsbach (2008), role perception refers to how journalists in various cultures and media systems view their role in relation to its social function. It is a generic set of standards that journalists adhere to in society and consider normatively acceptable in determining their conduct and employment (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004). Role perception can be also defined as a perspective on normative responsibilities and orientations of journalism in society, as well as its function to society, while journalists carry out their tasks (Hanitzsch, 2007; Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014; Neverla et al., 2021), and as institutional roles of journalism in society, both in terms of its normative responsibilities and its functional contribution to the society so that it is shaped by what journalists consider to be their professional tasks while executing their jobs and influenced by journalists' perception of and attitude towards their audience (Hanitzsch, 2007;Lohner, Banjac & Neverla, 2016)); hence, role perceptions mirror the way journalists report the news (Van Dalen, 2012).

Modeling the media system, therefore, requires an understanding of journalists' professional role perceptions, as their perceptions have a significant impact on their enactment. In this regard, Donsbach (2008) claims, journalists' role perceptions stifle their interactions with sources, as well as their decisions about news selection and presentation. Shoemaker and Reese (1996, p. 101) also contend, "Professional role perceptions do inform journalistic practice and have direct influence on news content". Consequently, one of the intervening variables, role perception, is considered to moderate the influence of primary variables such as news values and journalist subjective beliefs (Zelizer, 2019). Moreover, assessing role perception is critical because journalism is practiced in socio-political contexts that may differ from universal standards. In this vein, Berkowitz (2011) argues that the professional roles should be handled as standards that are suited to the cultural contexts of nations and the press system. This study therefore aims to make sense the post-EPRDF

emerging trends of journalism in Ethiopian landscape by taking the institutional role perceptions of journalism as a core denominator.

1.1. Post-EPRDF New Ethiopian political "reform" context

In January 2018, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) announced substantial reform measures in response to rising anti-government protests, including reviewing and removing legislation restricting political space, allowing free and fair elections, releasing political prisoners, and encouraging national reconciliation. Thousands of captives were soon released, and the notorious *Maekelawi* federal crimes investigations section in Addis Ababa was shut down (Freedom House, 2018). Haile-Mariam Desalegn, the prime minister and chairman of the EPRDF, announced his resignation in February 2018. He stated that his departure was "essential in the effort to carry out changes that would lead to enduring peace and democracy". EPRDF initiated a process of self-reflection and examined whom to designate as the new party chairman and Prime Minister behind closed doors, reinstating the state of emergency.

After six weeks of painstaking deliberation within the ruling party's leadership, Abiy Ahmed was chosen as Ethiopia's new prime minister in April, ushering in a new chapter in the country's political history, one that appears to put the country on an unprecedented trajectory of political change and opening. Various parties put forward candidates, and on 2 April 2018, Dr. Abiy Ahmed was elected as the next Prime Minister (Crisis Group Report, 2019 February; Semir). This new appointment happened after a fast-paced and often startling series of political events that culminated in early 2018 after a three-year period of anti-government protests and deadly government repression threatened to drive the country into civil war.

The new leadership rapidly announced its commitment to liberal reform, highlighting the importance of an independent, lively, and responsible press in attempts to achieve peace and develop national unity in his inauguration speech in April. Ethiopia's government embarked on a path of significant socio-political and economic transformation, which many consider as a positive sign for the country's peace, security, and growth. It took bold steps like releasing political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, reviewing, repealing, and replacing laws that violated citizens' basic human rights, involving women in the highest leadership positions (including the presidency and key ministerial positions), involving opposition parties and other marginalized groups in the political leadership, and reforming the military. There appeared to be no part of life in Ethiopia that was unaffected by the modes of change and hope (Crisis Group Report, 2019; Yonas, 2019).

Most notably, Ethiopia's leadership recognized and handled state-sponsored terrorism perpetrated against its own people, including human rights violations, extrajudicial killings, torture, and waterboarding, sleep deprivation, and castration. All of these were inhumane acts committed utilizing the same governmental equipment and machinery that existed between 28 May 1991 and 2 April 2018 (Crisis Group Report, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2019; Yonas, 2019).

Another notable political change was also started; the EPRDF, which ruled the nation from 1991 to 2018, was dismantled and replaced by the new Prosperity Party (PP). The internal political transformation of the EPRDF to the Prosperity Party (PP), which was completed in early 2020, saw Ethiopia's dominant coalition replaced by a single party. These dramatic changes were profoundly based on and led by this transformation. Until late November, the EPRDF contained ruling parties from Oromia, Amhara, and Tigray regions as well as the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNPPR).

However, the new political reform's leadership dissolved the four coalition parties and merged them, as well as five parties that rule Ethiopia's other regions, into a new party, the Prosperity Party, while the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) withdrew from the new arrangement. This phenomenon enjoys much support, including from Ethiopians who see it as a move away from

ethnic politics, but it also risks further stressing a fragile state whose bureaucracy is entwined with the EPRDF from top to bottom. Tigray's ruling party and Abiy's Oromo adversaries oppose the move, characterizing it as a step toward ending ethnic federalism (Crisis Group Report, 2019 December; SIPRI, 2020 March; Solomon, 2021). Already it was fraying, its dysfunction both reflecting and fuelling ethnic animosity.

Conversely, a year into Abiy's first term, public trust tends to be eroding, and the public is experiencing cognitive dissonance. Some long-standing issues, such as ethnic tensions and internal displacements, persisted. According to Yohannes (2019), Abiy's government has lost public trust, and ethnic hardliners from various factions are continuing to ignore the prime minister's appeals for pan-Ethiopian unity, threatening unrest in multiple places. Many people were perished and evicted as a result of ethnic tensions in the exhibited. Ethnic hostilities have uprooted nearly three million people and have killed hundreds (Crisis Group Report, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2020, 2019; Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, 2019; Semir, 2019).

Border disputes between Somali and Oromia, Amhara and Tigray, and the Afar and Somali regional states have yet to be resolved. Furthermore, within the federal system, many groups continue to demand the right to form their own states. Ethno-nationalists from various factions continue to defy the prime minister's calls for Ethiopian unity, threatening conflicts in multiple areas. As a corollary, tensions and confrontations over statehood administration have emerged in several regions. Displacement and home demolitions in the Addis Ababa region, which sparked ethnic tensions and major riots, are intensified. Houses on the outskirts of Addis Ababa are still being razed, displacing residents (Merera, 2018; Semir; Wu &Weaver, 1998).

On top of the above-mentioned existing quandaries, the COVID-19 pandemic rendered an extra crisis to Ethiopian political dynamics. Complying with the pandemic threat, on 31 March 2020, the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) announced that the election preparations were forced to be suspended and the election would be delayed for some period, within a month, the parliament endorsed the board's claim. Meanwhile, on 10 April 2020, the parliament declared a five-month state of emergency aiming to fight the pandemic. This created a contentious movement among the political elites and parties. The postponement of the election was not welcomed by many of the opposition political parties, and they argued that this causes constitutional crises claiming the parliament's five-year term ends in early October 2020 without holding a new election. At this point, some opposition political groups are seeking an interim government arrangement when the parliament term ends, while others are willing to let the reform government to have full authority until after the COVID-19 election.

At this juncture, the reform administration has proposed some feasible possibilities for putting the suspended election into action within a legal framework. As a result, scholastic debate was given four alternative solutions: dismissing parliament, imposing a state of emergency, rewriting the constitution, and seeking constitutional interpretation. Later, the government backed constitutional interpretation as constitutional, less time and resource intensive, and more manageable than the alternatives during the COVID 19 pandemic. This heightened political tensions, and opposition parties like the TPLF vehemently opposed the decision. They even declared that after early September 2020, they would not recognize the ruling party, Prosperity, because it lacked a constitutional mandate to lead. The opposition alleged the government of politicizing COVID-19 and abusing the state of emergency for political purposes (Assefa, 2021). For weeks, the government's contradicting arguments with some political opponents from the TPLF and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) heightened political tensions in the country as a result of the pandemic concern. This worsened the confrontation when the Tigray regional state, despite the federal government's desires, held regional elections on 9 September 2020.

With all of these ups and downs, the media system appears to follow multiple political agendas and ethnic interests that potentially shape journalistic practice which is potentially informed by

journalists' institutional role perceptions. In this vein, Neverla et al. (2021) claim that role perceptions have been influenced by who journalists report to, who they consider their target audiences, and how involved they are in daily reporting.

1.2. Research methodology

The study employed a qualitative research, mainly based on the data collected through in-depth interview with the underlying assumption of deliberating deeper thoughts or insights about the issue under the investigation. In-depth interviews are aimed at uncovering the issue so as to obtain detailed insights and results into the experiences, feelings, and perspectives of the informants. A purposive sampling technique was employed in reaching out key informants as a result of their particular features that facilitate in-depth exploration and understanding of the central issues of the research. Kvale (2006) argues that for qualitative research, in which generalizability is not the concern, participants are selected who may have insight and understanding about the research topic.

The study focuses on the three regional state media stations, Amhara Media Corporation (AMC), formerly Amhara Mass Media Agency (AMMA), Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN), and Tigray Mass Media Agency (TMMA), as well as three commercially labeled media houses: Amhara Satellite Radio and Television (ASRAT), Oromia Media Network (OMN), and *Dimtsi Weyane Tigray* (DWTV). As far as ownership is concerned, AMC, OBN, and TMMA are owned by Amhara, Oromia, and Tigray regional states, respectively, and they are leveled as public broadcaster by the Ethiopian Media Authority. Their immediate target audiences are deemed to be the three ethnic groups they represent. In the past, these media outlets were largely centralized and represented the EPRDF coalition as a whole, but with the growth in regional mass media agencies and political contestations, each station is now nurturing its own identity, resulting in increased polarization with agencies in other regions or with local companies carrying a different ethnic belonging in the post-EPRDF era. Accordingly, ownership has become subordinate to ethnic commitment (Skjerdal & Moges, 2021). Likewise, OMN and ASRAT media channels represent Oromo and Amhara identity, respectively. With the advent of the new political reform, both of these fledgling media firms, based in Addis Ababa, ceased local broadcast for a variety of reasons. They were to a certain extent staffed with returned diaspora activists. *Dimtsi Weyane Tigray* (DW), on the other hand, has a four-decade long history as a Tigray affiliated media outlet limited to radio, for many years based in Mekelle and launched a television medium at the eve of the new political reform recently.

These media were carefully chosen for a variety of reasons. To begin with, they were established with the advent of the country's ethno-linguistic federal system, primarily to serve the ethnic groups they represent. These media outlets are named after the ethnic groups they claim to represent, as defined by the federal system's ethnic divisions. Similarly, they present themselves as advocates for their oppressed ethnic identity and stand against injustices perpetrated against the ethnic group (Muluken, Biset &Mulatu 2021). Moreover, according to the World Population Review (2019) report, these media represent the three ethnic groups (*Oromo, Amhara, and Tigray*) which constitute about 70% of the population of the country.

Prior to the enactment of the interview session, some important steps were undertaken with respect to the established process recognized in the literature of qualitative research. In so doing, a great care was given to the preparation of the interview questions, validating the items with pilot project, selecting the key informants, conducting the interview session, and maintaining ethical considerations. Afterwards, media managers, editors, and reporters who have been working from the six media houses were taken as participants for the in-depth interview to answer the research question. By so doing, rigorous semi-structured and unstructured in-depth interviews were conducted with 27 informants until the data got saturated. Table 1 illustrates the participants of the study.

The data analysis process was guided by Creswell's (2002) heuristic model of qualitative data analysis technique which included preparing the data for analysis, carrying on to deeper understanding of the data, and representing the data and conducting interpretations of the wider

Table 1. Key informants of the in-depth interview		
No.	**Key informants**	**No. of participants**
1	Reporters	12
2	Editors	5
3	Members of the media management	4
4	Scholars from media and communication &Political science	4
5	Experts from Ethiopian Media Authority(EMA)	2
	Total	27

meaning of the data complying with the theoretical framework of the study enacted. Moreover, Denzin's (1998)'s four phases of data analysis and interpretation: sense making, representation, legitimation, and desire were employed for further operation. Each data source for the interview was given a unique identification code and number prior to the analysis. That is, the individual interviews with the reporters were coded as RP that stands for reporters. Since there were 12 individual interviews with the reporters, they were coded as RP1, RP2 ... RP12. The individual interviews with the editors were coded as ED interview and sequenced ED1to ED5 Interview. The deliberation with the members of the management of the media channels were coded as MM interview that stands for member of the management and numbered as MM interview1, MM interview 2, till MM4. Interview with the media and communication scholars were coded as MCS that and ranging as MCS1, MCS2, MCS3, and MCS4. Similarly, the experts from the Mass Media Authority were coded as EMA interview and given chronology to EMA1 and EMA2.

1.3. Analytical framework

The study is mainly guided by Hanitzsch's analytical model of journalism culture and social identity theory (SIT) in giving meaning to the findings. Hanitzsch (2007) provides a comprehensive and multi-dimensional structure based on a continuum of role perception scholarly literature that allows us to accommodate the global variety in journalists' role perceptions asserted by various media systems. Interventionism, power distance, and market orientations are three essential constructs in his analytical approach. SIT, on the other hand, presumes to be crucial for systematic analysis of the in-group and out-group rivalries among the ethnic-based media. The theory underscores the aim of the viewer to evaluate the in-group positively, reach positive social identity, and attain goals such as positive self-esteem or self-actualization (Trepte & Krämer, 2007). SIT has been widely applied to explain intergroup relations (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). The theory argues that intergroup conflict arises from psychological processes of perceptual categorization, social comparison, and identity enhancement. Individuals classify themselves into distinct groups of "us" and "them" in competitive terms (Kim and Zhou 2020). By using these conceptual tools, the analysis focused on how ethnicity influences on the institutional role perception of journalists in contemporary Ethiopian media landscape.

2. Results

The thematic analysis of journalists' reflections on their professional role perceptions shows some general characteristics. Consequently, the-finding of the in-depth interview uncovers promoting ethno-centric identity and culture, becoming guardians and advocates for ethnic communities, mainstreaming the regional politics and hegemony, and considering themselves as struggle activators and change agents are found to be the most remarkable institutional role perceptions of journalism in the studied media channels. The following subsequent sections give brief account on that.

2.1. Promoting ethnocentric identity and cultural values

The finding confirms that promoting ethnic identity and cultural values was perceived to be one of the dominant roles of the media channels. This can be considered as the ways of identity

construction through creating and maintaining ethnic cohesion and cultural identity. Each media channel considers upholding the respective identity and cultural discourses aiming to strengthen the social fabric among members of the ethnic groups and promoting self-glorification. The following excerpts may demonstrate the perceived role of journalism in the selected media. One of the management members in Amhara Media Corporation responds:

> Indeed, there is a tendency of advocating Amhara nationalism in our coverage, but the ethnic based sentiment is not from the negative perspective rather it is to introduce and develop the language, culture and values of the Amhara people. It is not practiced on the basis of disregarding other ethnic groups' values and hostility (MM1-personal interview on 19 September 2021).

This perception was also shared by other journalists in other media channels. In this regard, another key informant who is members of the OBN management emphasizes the role of the media channel in alleviating the communication barriers among the Oromo community developing different dialects to a standard and promoting cultural values to the world. The respondent explains:

> OBN is expected to introduce the language, culture, and values of the Oromo people. Consequently, some accomplishments are noted. OBN could facilitate communication by bringing all the Afan Oromo dialects spoken in different areas of Oromia together in one place. The media outlet was instrumental in introducing *Geda* and *Irreecha* to a wider audience (MM2-personal interview on 18 September 2021).

Other journalists during the interview session confirmed that the above perception, "Among other things, I believe that my responsibility in DW is to promote the Tigray people's identity, culture, and values without downplaying others" (RP11-personal interview on 1 October 2021). The editorial policies of the media channels also support this concept of role perception. If we look at the editorial policy of Amhara Media Corporation, one of the main goals is "raising awareness of the Amhara people's culture, values, and creative wealth, as well as other ethnic groups living in the region" (002/2011, p. 3). As a result, one of the institutional function perspectives of journalism in both regional and commercial media outlets is conceptualized as advocating identity and cultural elements, as seen in the preceding data presentation. The media channels adhere to glorify their various ethnic groups' identity construction fabrics in order to promote ethnocentric beliefs.

2.2. Guardians and advocates for the ethnic communities

The other dimension of journalists' institutional role perception is related to the function of caretaking and guardianship of the community. The finding witnesses that journalists consider themselves as sympathizers of the interests, concerns, claims, and motives of the members of the ethnic community they seem to champion on one hand and protecting members of their respective groups from harm on the other. They intend to define their roles as advocating issues raised by the ethnic group members and political elites through the mobilization of different stakeholders. In this regard, one of the respondent states, "In my view, the Amhara people suffer a lot and I believe that there is no body helping get its voice heard. Therefore, I think I have to stand for these people. I believe I have to be voice to this community" (RP8-personal interview on 5 October 2021).

Another informant also shared the above perception and enhances his role by influencing the government to consider the interest of the ethnic group he aims to advocate, "I am convinced that the center of my report should be on the quests of the Oromo people so that I focus on urging the federal government to due regards to the interests and claims of the Oromo people" (RP12-personal interview on 5 October 2021). Similarly, this perspective seems to be endorsed by journalists' from the other regional state or ethnic group media station.

> As it is delineated on the name, the media channel is established to serve the Tigray people. Central to my report, I believe the political, economic and social issues of the Tigray people

need to be pinpointed. In this regard, I consider myself as an advocate of the people (RP11-personal interview on 1 October 2021).

The journalists believe that their roles should not be restricted to just reporting of events, as seen by the previous transcripts. They advanced their roles as being the voice of their respective ethnic communities and mainstreaming presumptive shared concerns. Accordingly, one may argue that these journalists consider their primary responsibility is to represent ethnic communities. This in turn leads them to choose the news worthiness based on how useful it is to the social groupings they favor. In this regard, journalists may not take a position to stay apart from the flow of events, as do the detached observers, rather to intervene and promote change. This form of institutional role perception could be attributed to result in the macro-level influences. In light of this, an informant from media and communication scholars substantiated, "This kind of perspective regenerated from the political structure thereby each media channel goes to its ethnic village to maintain power and resource" (MCS4 interview).

2.3. Mainstreaming the regional politics and hegemony

The way journalists define their distance relationship with power distance could also guide their work and enable them to justify their activities. Media organizations tend to be ideologically bound with certain political groups. The struggle to power and hegemony also seems to be reflected in the institutional role perceptions of journalism. In this sense, the finding affirms that journalists tend to appear to be collaborative with the political positions of their respective regional states by giving coverage prior to any other issue and maintaining the positive image of the regional states they claim to stand to serve by annihilating the negative features towards it. Consistent with this argument, respondents from the interview confirmed that they give priority to the statements, discussions, and press releases of their corresponding regional government or ruling party in their news reporting. In this regard, voice of regional state and the political party elites perceived to be given prime coverage. With different tonality, this view was shared by many informants of OBN, DW, AMC, and TMMA. One of the informants from the management member explains:

> I believe that we have to go in line with stands of the regional government. The main source of finance for the operations and paying salary to personnel's is the Amhara regional state. Besides, the media organization is accountable for it (MM1-personal interview on 19 September 2021).

Even the order in which the news articles appeared in the newscast was thought to reflect this. Higher-ranking regional or council leaders' statements are thought to be broadcast as a headline. There is no story which is away from the interest of the ruling party. Agendas that are out most of the prosperity party and key political figures of the party are presumed to be central to the news report (RP2, RP4, and ED2). Showing solidarity to the regional governments' political ideology is also likely advent in other media channels on their institutional role perceptions how journalism functions with different magnitudes. They were induced to build the regional government's image by refraining not to report the negative attributes of the region and it also extends to be parallel with the political elites in making adversarial relationship with the federal and other regional governments. One of the reporters in this regard explains:

> I had to cover the news stories that damaged the reputation of the federal government because of the political conflict between the Tigray regional state and the federal government that emerged after the political reform. On the other hand, highlighting the positive aspects of the Tigray regional state and letting the Tigray people support it (RP5-personal interview on 9 October 2021).

Concomitantly, this motive was also reflected by another editor. In the agenda setting process, he said, "Reporting issues against the federal government and praising TPLF and its incumbents were a collectively shared perception in our media channel" (ED3-personal interview on 24 September 2021). The institutional role perception over the image building of the respective

regional states also looks as if to be intensified by annihilating intra-regional problems in the reporting of news stories thereby issues that challenge the regional states tend to be overlooked. One of the key informants explains:

> Institutionally there is an agreed up on trend that problems and questions from Tigray region should not be reported. Consequently, frequently raised problems such as safety net, fertilizers and quests for the new district organizations are not reported (RP7-personal interview on 4 October 2021).

Other media sources appear to be keeping a similar institutional role perception of regional governments' image building. "While covering news stories, there is a consensus of suppressing if not abandoning issues that expose wrongdoing by the administration, such as conflicts and internal-displacements," one of the editors said (ED2). Generally, the finding revealed that showing solidarity and playing a facilitative role towards the regional politics seem to be central to the continuum of instructional role of journalism. This could be further extrapolated to ownership structure and individual journalists' need of job security. Consistent with this argument, one of the respondents illustrates, "Since our main sources of the news stories are the government communication institutions and the source of finance is the regional state, there is an inclination to the ruling party and the regional state's interest" (RP2-personal interview on 20 September 2021). The other factor would be ensuring their job security and career. In this vein,-respondent RP6, for example, asserts, "Our news report renders on the political interest of the regional government away from the editorial policy. This happened due to the economic dependence and in fear of losing the job".

2.4. Struggle activators and change agents

The other dimension of institutional role perception resides to becoming struggle accelerators. This role was mainly pronounced by the two commercial ethnic-based media, i.e. OMN and ASRAT even though they are also regarded as voices of the opposition parties by some scholars. Journalists in these media channels likely consider themselves as champions of struggle venues through activating and mobilizing their corresponding ethnic groups to stand for some collectively shared interests. In this regard, journalists even contemplated they were a part of a struggle. At this juncture, they seemed to hold adverse relations with the regional and federal governments at the expense of accelerating the ethnic motives. One of the participants defined his role is as change agent in his community withstanding the financial and workload challenges.

> Despite working all week on Amhara nationalism, we make less money than other media outlets. For the common purpose, we take this action. The Amhara people, in our opinion, have endured misery for the past 27 years as well as during the current reform regime. Therefore, the founding of the Prosperity Party and the actions of the prime minister are not of interest to us. Instead, we prefer to mobilize our people under one banner to fight for their rights and interests (RP9-personal interview on 5 October 2021).

Journalists from OMN also endorsed this perception and synthesized their roles as struggle agents. However, their role perceptions have been characterized by the relative position of the management members towards the Oromia regional state and the federal government. When the OMN crew entered the country following the political reform, there seemed to be a collaborative role but gradually changed to adversary to any movement of the current administration with the advent of conflicts between the founding manager, Activist Jawar Mohammed, and incumbents of the ruling party.

> Our institutional roles depend on the political orientation of the management members of the media channel. While they had good relations with the federal government, we perceived as facilitating agents. Later, while Jawar Mohammed quarreled, our institutional role changed and tended to expose the wrong doings of Abiy Ahmed's administration at any circumstance. We provoked people against the ruling party findings even a silly thing against the Oromo people (RP12-personal interview on 5 October 2021).

The above excerpt shows that the institutional role of the journalism function in commercial media channel is mainly perceived as change agents engaging through activating the community for struggle. Upon doing this, journalists get involved in the political movements away from detach observers. In light of this, they tend to have adversary relation with those in power. However, it does not mean that they play a watchdog role ensuring a check and balance of the government activities; instead, they take side to their respective ethnic groups' interest. The finding also confirms that sometimes this kind of adverse relations with the ruling party instigates by the political view and individual interests of the media owners. Accordingly, it shapes the agenda setting process in that anything which is believed to expose the bad side of the government gets attention.

3. Discussion

3.1. Interventionism as a dominant institutional role perception

Based on the interview data from the six media channels, one can distinguish different roles that journalists perceived to be guiding their work. Consequently, the finding uncovers promoting ethno-centric identity and culture, becoming guardians and advocates for ethnic communities, mainstreaming the regional politics and hegemony, and considering themselves as struggle activators and change agents are found to be the most remarkable institutional role perceptions of journalism in the studied media channels. Role perceptions are shaped by what the journalists consider to be their professional tasks while executing their job and influenced by journalists' conception of and attitude towards their audience (Christians, 2009; Hanitzsch et al., 2011).

Indeed, it is therefore, legitimate to deduce that the journalists are not detached observers and objective transmitters of events rather they have missions striving to achieve. This form of institutional role perception of journalism equates to be interventionist role from the journalists' active engagement dimension. The degree to which journalists support a particular cause and uphold a set of principles is known as interventionism. This type of coverage considerably increases efforts to influence public opinion and shape political agendas (Mellado et al., 2012). In interventionist dimension, journalists are forced to take a stance and be partisans that seek to reform society by challenging the status quo (Christians et al., 2010; Ward, 2009). This dimension notes the extent to which journalists pursue a particular mission and promote certain values. The interventionism dimension, which Himelboim & Limor, 2005, May, p. 9) labled"involvement sequence," stretches from "passive" (low) to "intervention" (high). The intervention pole of the continuum becomes manifested in role models like the "participant," "advocate," and "missionary" (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004), with journalists taking a more active and assertive role in their reporting. This form of institutional role perception is also characterized as roles that belong to the advocative-radical function compelling journalists to conceive of themselves as "participants" in political life rather than as objective bystanders thereby journalists act as missionaries of values and ideologies, as advocates of groups and causes, and as adversaries of the powerful (Christians, 2009).

Consistent with the finding of this study, journalism practices that adhere to an interventionist approach may act on behalf of the socially disadvantaged or as mouthpiece of a political party and other groups whose interests are at stake. The impetus behind interventionist journalism is not to stay apart from the flow of events, as does the neutral and disinterested observer, but to participate, intervene, get involved, and promote change (Gunaratne, 2006). The active journalist, enters the playing field instead of standing at the sideline observing the game. The journalist acknowledges that they are news constructors who take active approach to the news production process. These journalists therefore believe that their major task is to act on behalf of this part of the audience. Consequently, they select the news according to its instrumentality for the social groups they support (Donsbach, 2008). In congruent, journalists interviewed in the study consider themselves as active participants in ethno-political mobilizations.

The other extreme end of the power distance dimension is a form of journalism that positions itself as "loyal" to those in power. This kind of journalism can be bluntly loyal: taking on

"propagandist role" (Pasti, 2015, p. 99), practicing "agitator journalism" (Wu, Weaver, & Johnson, 1996, p. 544), being defensive of authorities, routinely engaging in self-censorship, and serving as mouthpiece of the government or the party. The adversary pole of the continuum captures a type of journalism that denounces wrongdoings and challenges those in power. The "loyal and opportunist" journalism, on the other hand, tends to defend authorities, and serves as a messenger for the political and economic elite (Hanitzsch, 2007; Mellado et al., 2012).

Accordingly, from the perspective of power distance, relatively speaking, the finding reveals that both loyal and adversarial roles seem to be upholder. While the regional media channels inclined to be loyal to the corresponding regional governments' political ideology, the commercial ones play adversarial role towards the regional and federal government structures in exercising their ethno-national motives. This could be attributed to the ownership structure. Since the regional media channels are mainly financed by the regional state governments, there is a tradition of loyalty to the regional politics ideology and this determines the media content and their frames, and the selected commercial media are also implicitly initiated to meet the interests of some ethnic groups and induced by the political elites behind the stations (Addisu, 2019; Gebru et al., 2021; Menychle, 2020; Skjerdal & Moges, 2021).

However, what makes this finding different from the categories given by Hanitzsch (2007) is that these two poles are not constantly maintained in contemporary Ethiopian media landscape. Due to the advent of ethno-sectarian polarization in the contemporary Ethiopian media landscape (Behailu et al., 2022); there are many occasions at which both the regional and commercial media channels reporting similar narratives in favoring the respective ethnic groups' interests. The adversarial role, on the other hand, does not seem to function from the notion of watchdog role in exposing the wrongdoings and challenging those in power; rather it is guided from the orientation of in-group favoritism. It is, therefore, the researchers' point of philosophical departure in that loyalty may not always to be conceptualized in relation to the power distance with the government but also the ethno-political narratives in media system of countries where the ethnic division gets rife in one hand, adversarial role does not necessarily refer to playing a watch dog role as functioned in Ethiopian commercial ethnic-based media.

This kind of subjective involvement of journalists could be attributed to the ethno-political dynamism and polarization of the country (Semir, Yonas, 2019), the macro- and micro-level hierarchy of influences ranging from individual to societal system (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Also, the journalists' perception and attitude towards the audience could be viable to be a relevant factor of influence on professional role perceptions, i.e. who journalists feel accountable to, and who they consider to be their target groups, their level of education, interest, and engagement, both with regard to daily reporting and coverage of specific conflicts (Van Dalen et al. 2012, 2012; Weaver, 2005).

Thus, considering the findings of the journalistic practice of the sampled media channels, the study argues that the interventionist approach of the institutional role perceptions possessed by the journalists is central to the construction and framing of the news stories. The claim is-that the role that journalists perceive themselves to have in society and a certain media station can explain a part of their perception and implementation of the objectivity norm. Consistent with this line of argument, Donsbach (2008) asserts that these role perceptions are thought to influence journalists' professional behavior and they are seen as indicators of different news cultures. Shoemaker and Reese (1996 p. 101) also point out, "professional role perceptions do inform journalistic practices and have direct influence on news content, since these determine what the communicator thinks is worth transmitting to his or her audience and how the story should be developed".) further strengthens, this would also mean that journalists draw on their organization's established ways of organizing news stories when producing journalism pertinent to their institutional role perceptions, and Graber (2003) posits that journalists' news stories would vary based on their role perceptions.

Given the above assertions of interventionist role perceptions of journalists, this study dares to contend that the way journalists understand their role considerably influenced the way they interacted with news sources and make decisions about news selection and presentation. Accordingly, the agenda setting process, selection of stories and sources, and angles of framing seem to be highly embedded by the perceived institutional role of journalism. This means role perceptions of journalists may have an impact on "the way they interact with sources and make decisions about news selection and presentation" (Donsbach, 2008, p. 2605), as role perceptions represent the generalized expectations which journalists presume exist in society and among stakeholders (Baugut & Scherr, 2019) and role perceptions mirror the way journalists report news stories (Van Dalen, 2012).

4. Conclusion

The politics of belonging further pervades the institutional role perceptions and ethical ideologies overwhelmingly. The way these journalists perceived their audience, including their needs and expectations, is an important factor in defining their professional roles. The study concludes that the characteristics, expectations, and interests of audiences limited journalists' professional identity to a larger extent, and were a source of dissonance between their professional identity and practice. In light of this, the study demonstrated the promotion of ethnocentric identity and culture, becoming guardians and advocates of ethnic communities, directing regional politics and splendor, and acting as instigators of struggle and agents of change as the most significant institutional functions of journalism while executing their work. Thus, one can argue that journalists' institutional role perceptions are subordinate to the ethnic orientation prevailing in existing Ethiopian media system.

4.1. Theoretical implication

The study's findings on the institutional role perceptions of the regional and commercial Ethiopian ethnic-based media journalists vividly challenge analytical model of journalism culture in relation to its power-distance category. The adversary function of the continuum is defined as a type of journalism practice that openly confronts those in power, serving as a "fourth estate" as a guardian force of democracy, denounces wrongdoings, and critique of society and its institutions. The media outlets playing adversary roles are believed to be relentless cross examiners who offer independent and radical critiques of society and its institutions, and they are skeptical of, if not hostile to, every assertion made by those who are in power (Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Hanitzsch, 2007; Mellado et al., 2012). Unlike the justifications provided, the findings of this study confirm that having an adversary function of role perception does not always imply adhering to a watchdog role serving as a fourth estate. For example, the institutional role perception of commercially labeled ethno-nationalist media such as ASRAT and OMN journalists proved to be an adversary pole in terms of power distance, but this does not mean that these media channels play an independent role in social control. Rather, it is clear from the findings that they are steadfast. When explaining the power distance relations under institutional role perceptions, it appears that there is a need to contextualize the cases and the media situation in a given country.

Author details
Behailu Atinafu Dessie[1]
E-mail: behailuatinafu2014@gmail.com
Adem Chanie Ali[1]
Mulatu Alemayehu Moges[2]
[1] Department of Journalism and Communication, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia.
[2] School of Journalism and Communication, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia.

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