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Contemporary Contested Ethiopian Media Practice and Its Influence on Journalists' Autonomy and Role

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ABSTRACT

This study explores contemporary journalists' autonomy and role in the Ethiopian contested media practice by taking journalists working in Amhara Media Corporation (AMC). A qualitative research approach was used to collect data from journalists and admin staff. For triangulation, this study combined document analysis and observation. Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted with purposively selected journalists and admin staff. The interviews used semi-structured and open-ended questions that would allow journalists to reflect their perspectives freely. The study applied the Hierarchy of Influences Model to examine the data and support discussion. The findings of this study clearly signify that partisanship among journalists, the politicization of journalism, and flip-flop media practices prevail. The outsourced programs are used as a tool for silencing journalists from working independently. The journalists' safety anxiety is the grim reality at AMC. As a result, journalists' professional content productions and autonomies specifically on political and sensitive issues were negotiated or interfered. It is therefore challenging to maintain complete professional autonomy in order to be impartial, unbiased, and independent while working as a journalist in Ethiopia. It is recommended that the regional and federal governments should allow media independence and journalists' autonomy in the Ethiopian media industry.

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Introduction

Media practice in the Ethiopian context has had a volatile nature and history that depends on the political developments of the nation. Historically, Ethiopia's media landscape faced a state apparatus that has been hostile to journalism practice (Workneh 2022a). This scenario is presumed to influence how independent journalists are. Scores of studies (e.g., Abebe 2017, 2019; Behailu 2022; Gagliardone 2014; Kebede, Ali, and Moges 2022; 2023; Kiflu, Ali, and Nigussie 2023; Moges 2017; Mohammed 2015; 2021; Skjerdal 2009, 2012; 2021; Stremlau 2011) are conducted on the Ethiopian media organizations related to journalists working climate contexts. For instance, Skjerdal (2012; 2021) brings the concept of "competing loyalties" of media practices and the politics on the journalism profession and

government-oriented reporting. Gagliardone (2014) and Stremlau (2011) examine the relationship between political power-political economy and the media in Ethiopia.

It is guaranteed all regional and national media outlets are owned and financed by the regional and federal governments of Ethiopia respectively. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopian (FDRE) constitution (1995, 29:5) authorizes “any media financed by or under the control of the State shall be operated in a manner ensuring its capacity to entertain diversity in the expression of opinion”. This issue is also acknowledged by the Ethiopian Media Authority’s (EMA) Proclamation (2021). EMA, which is financed by the Ethiopian government, is the regulatory body that scrutinizes the activities of regional and national media organizations. Amhara Media Corporation (AMC), which is one of the regional media organizations in Ethiopia-hires large number of journalists-more than 400 journalists are employed in it. This case study may serve as an ideal instance of how the country’s media industry operates overtly. AMC’s media practice is demonstrated by using a hierarchy of influences model (HIM) developed by Shoemaker and Reese (2014) that gives emphasis to the factors that shape the media content that forms webs of relationships between individual-level professionals and their routines, the organizations that house them, the institutions into which they cohere, and the social system within which they operate and help maintain. The key importance therefore is taking AMC as a case to explain the journalistic practice, role and autonomy of journalists organizationally.

Professional autonomy is multidimensional, fluid and moving conceptual construction (see Hanitzsch 2017; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; 2018; Örnebring 2013; Reich and Hanitzsch 2013; Sjøvaag 2013; Waisbord 2013). Professional autonomy is one of the holy grails of journalism and has paramount importance (Urbániková 2021). Institutional practices, socialization processes and professionalization efforts are all factors that contribute to limiting the autonomy of the reporter and shaping the news (Sjøvaag 2013). The potential limits of professional autonomy stem from various sources that operate at multiple levels, from the level of the individual journalist to the level of the organization and society (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013). Professional autonomy and practice of journalism are much researched in the western world (refer, Hanitzsch 2011; Reich and Hanitzsch 2013), but in the context of Ethiopian media, little effort is made. Journalistic roles represent and articulate discursive positions that compete in a relational structure- the discursive field and profession can be highly pragmatic (Evetts 2003; Hanitzsch 2018). In certain circumstances, this concept has been referred to as (*negotiated*) *role orientation* (Hanitzsch et al. 2019; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Raemy and Vos 2020).

To conceptualize, several studies on media practice have shown there is a discursive (re)creation, (re)interpretation, appropriation, and contestation of professional journalistic roles depending on the emergency and development of contextual matters or components (e.g., Donsbach 2008; Hanitzsch 2017; 2018; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; 2018; Mellado 2019; Singer 2019; Waisbord 2013; 2017). Consequently, the approach to the AMC organizational study focuses on the journalists’ perceptions of their social roles, external influences, and professional identities. There are few studies conducted on AMC journalists and media practice (e.g., Behailu 2022; Dagim 2013; Eshetu 2012; Kebede, Ali, and Moges 2022; 2023; Mekonnen 2022). For example, Desta (2017) examined Amhara Radio (AR), Behailu (2022), Mekonnen (2022) and Kebede, Ali, and Moges (2022; 2023) studied AMC at the organizational level. The studies listed above, except

Kebede, Ali, and Moges (2023) that addressed HIM in certain extents, did not comprehensively examine the hierarchical influences journalists experienced at every level of hierarchy during their journalistic practice. However, according to Belair-Gagnon and Revers (2018), occupational analyses shed light on values, ethics, and journalistic roles and ranged from analyses of journalistic behaviors in specific social settings to the development of global ethical standards of journalism.

Dominantly, Ethiopian media outlets are state-owned, party-affiliated or party-inclined which are used to bolster party ideology, values, socio-economic, political and development issues. They are Public Service Broadcasting by name, but practically owned by the ruling party/government. Ethiopia's state-owned media explicitly endorses the government i.e., politicians use them to advance their interests (Dodolla 2016). To this end, the way our media system operates has always been and always will be influenced by the government (Benson and Powers 2011). According to Djankov et al. (2003), government control of the media constitutes a monopoly, which would stifle information and manipulate the public from making informed decisions. Based on these disparities and contestation of Ethiopian media practice for establishing vigorous journalism, AMC needs to come to the center of exploration regarding journalists' autonomy and role organizationally.

The research on journalistic autonomy reveals that negotiations over autonomy take place at the intersection between practice and the editorial function (Sjøvaag 2013). It is contextualized how journalists practice their journalistic content production independently and professionally in the facets of actors, such as coworkers, editors, media executives, political elites, and the larger social affairs. Scrutinizing journalists' professional autonomy and role, assessing the management hierarchies, and underpinning the contributory factors that might ultimately have influences on the journalists' performance is an important perspective to explore. Approaching selected journalists to share working experiences and perspectives within AMC's hierarchical arrangements, and contextualizing journalism practice in the Ethiopian local media uncovers the following objectives.

- To explore how journalists negotiate hierarchical influences when practicing journalism in AMC,
- To identify the professional roles journalists play in AMC,
- To explain journalists' autonomy over their journalistic content in AMC.

Theoretical Framework

The Hierarchy of Influences Model (HIM) entangles with the concept of media sociology that deals with media-constructed reality and social reality of media content primarily produced by professional journalists. The HIM is a model describing the various factors affecting news content, arrayed on a continuum from a micro-individual to the macro-social system level that shapes media organizations content, and it is sometimes called the hierarchical model or levels of influence model (Reese 2001, 2007, 2010; 2016; 2019; Reese and Shoemaker 2016; Shoemaker and Reese 1996; 2014). It takes into account the multiple forces that simultaneously impinge on the media and suggests how influence at one level may interact with that at another (Reese, 2007; Shoemaker

and Reese 2014). Using AMC as a case study to demonstrate Ethiopia's contemporary media practice, the HIM serves as a theoretical foundation. It is assumed many actors are involved in mediating messages within AMC's working realm. Considering an entire media organization level would reveal how journalists' roles and autonomy change depending on the organizational working environment of media, and it is suggested to consider the entire structure within newsrooms and beyond involving factors. In this connection, Belair-Gagnon and Revers (2018) affirm analyzing journalism through the sociological prism is central to understanding its larger societal implications and a continuous reminder that a journalism study is not an end in itself. To arrive at important findings, all HIM levels are contextualized and explored specifically, five levels constitute the HIM.

Primarily, there is the social system level which deals with how media symbolic content is connected with larger social interests, and how meaning is constructed in the service of power, and a critical view would consider that the recruitment of journalists, their attitudes, the routines they follow, their organizations' policy, and those organizations positions in the larger social structure work to support the status quo, narrow the range of social discourse, and serve to make the media agencies of social control (Reese 2001; Reese and Shoemaker 2016). *Secondly*, the social organization level deals with the media that exist in relationship with other organizational power centers in society, relationships that can be coercive or collusive and can shape media content (Shoemaker and Reese 2014). This perspective considers the power to shape content is not the media's alone, but is shared with a variety of organizations in society, including the government, advertisers, public relations, influential news sources, interest groups, and even other media organizations (Reese 2001; Reese and Shoemaker 2016).

Thirdly, the organizational level resides in the middle of HIM that bridges the individual routines and the societal perspectives. The organizational factors of influence on journalism emanate from editors (newsroom), managers and owners (media organization), and at the organizational level, we may consider the goals and policies of a larger social structure and how power is exercised within it (Reese 2001; Milojević and Krstić 2018). At this level, professionalism is a negotiated set of values worked out to satisfy the organization's needs (Reese 2007; Shoemaker and Reese 2014). The professional practice, roles and autonomy contestations and challenges that Ethiopian journalists from the Global South encounter are addressed in the larger context of their day-to-day work.

Fourthly, the routine practices level represents a set of constraints on the individual worker and forms the immediate context, both within and through which these individuals do their jobs. Routines are the ways of working that constitute that practice, including those unstated rules and ritualized enactments that are not always made explicit (Reese and Shoemaker 2016). The routine level of media practice constitutes the immediate environment of media workers: reporters, editors, and writers. *Fifth*, the individual level of analysis considers the personal traits of news workers, the news values they adhere to, the professional roles they take on, and other demographic features e.g., gender, race, and class (Reese and Shoemaker 2016; Shoemaker and Reese 2014). Individual journalists working for media organizations are influenced by the organization's ownership authority, personal preferences, and predisposition toward partiality (Reese 2001; Reese and Shoemaker 2014). The attitudes, training, and background of the journalist or media worker more generally are influential factors to produce content.

Studies have been carried out, using HIM as the theoretical framework, in many media contexts of the world. One perspective of its use is connected to the Global South media context; in this regard, a couple of recent research could be pointed out (e.g., Ejaz, Ittefaq, and Arif 2022; Ittefaq et al. 2021; Jamil and Appiah-Adjei 2020; Jin et al. 2022; Saladeen 2022). Given that Ethiopia is situated in the Global South, establishing HIM within the context of the country's media environment would result in an important viewpoint. Adapting this model as a research framework enables the researchers to scrutinize AMC journalists' interactions in those identified five levels step by step and to explain the major themes that emerged from the hierarchical analyses overall. These levels are contextualized to demonstrate the extent to which journalists in Ethiopia's media landscape are engaging in journalistic practice, carrying out journalistic roles, and experiencing a degree of professional autonomy.

Generally, a pertinent focus is provided in shaping the journalistic content that journalists generate and disseminate to the public by the integration of HIM with the journalistic role and autonomy concepts. Numerous academics integrate media sociology's hierarchy of influence levels into the journalistic role and autonomy (e.g., Deuze 2005; Donsbach and Patterson 2004; Garcés-Prettel, Arroyave-Cabrera, and Baltar-Moreno 2020; Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011; Hellmueller and Mellado 2015; Mellado 2019). To that end, this study explores the way journalistic role and autonomy AMC grants journalists to decide independently what stories to cover and how to report them in Ethiopia's context of ownership, politics, and economics. Therefore, incorporating journalistic role and autonomy into the HIM framework could enhance better comprehend how journalists navigate the complex environment of AMC's media policies and procedures, freedom of the press granted, pressures from media owners and society's dominant ideology, and political realities to produce journalistic content in the Global South media practice of Ethiopia.

Methodology and Data

This study followed homogeneous purposive sampling for gathering data qualitatively from AMC journalists, editors and managers. The qualitative approach helps to gather actual practices from the journalists, editors, deputy editors-in-chief, editors-in-chief, deputy managers, and managers. Hence the management bodies and journalists' actual lived experiences in their professional role and autonomy served as prospective sources of data for a hierarchical analysis of AMC (see Figure 1). This comprehensive organizational study would help understand the conditions under which journalists work. This study used a case study as a strategy. Donsbach and Patterson (2004) state that the beliefs of journalists in a particular country and how those beliefs influence the day-to-day operations of newsrooms can be explained using case studies of that country.

Particularly, an instrumental case study is used. According to Sarah et al. (2011), the instrumental case study uses a particular case (some of which may be better than others) to gain a broader appreciation of an issue or phenomenon. This makes it feasible for the current researchers to collect data using techniques like interviews, observations, and document analysis and makes it possible to pinpoint major trends and generalizations of Ethiopia's contemporary media practice. The case study scenario of AMC potentially represents the Ethiopian government-owned media industry practices considerably. This is because all regional media outlets are responsible for their regional councils.

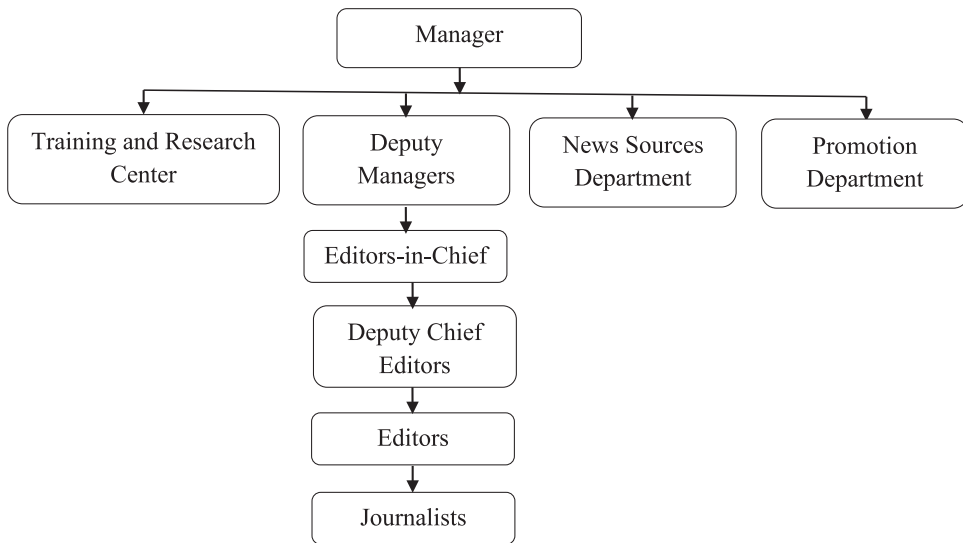


Figure 1. AMC main hierarchical arrangement.

Broadly speaking, the national proclamation¹ asserts that EMA shall be accountable to the House of Peoples' Representatives of the FDRE that appoints director general and deputy director generals by the recommendation of the Prime Minister of the nation. This entails the media practices are indirectly monitored and controlled by the government. Therefore, taking AMC as a case study is quite plausible to partially conclude as a representative of the media practices in Ethiopia.

In-depth interviews, document analysis and field observations were used as data collection tools to obtain insightful, genuine, and unexpected perspectives. In this regard, in-depth interviewing involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation, and it is useful when one wants detailed information about a person's thoughts, behaviors or to explore new issues in depth (Boyce and Neale 2006). Along with the use of in-depth interviews and document analysis, non-participant unstructured observations were used as a significant data collection tool. The internal forms, reports, manuals, proclamation, and editorial policy of AMC, and national media laws, policies, and declarations are included in the document analysis. These records aided the analysis of the hierarchical relationships between media personalities in various positions and extra-media actors, and journalists' journalistic practices of how these documents shape media content. In a systematic naturalistic manner, both direct and indirect observations were made. Indirectly, the perceptions journalists' had during their genuine contacts in the newsroom provided relevant information. In this case, researchers observe how journalists behave in their newsroom day-to-day practice using participant observation (Donsbach 2008). Directly, whenever the researchers attended editorial meetings or other engagements, field notes were taken. Most crucially, field notes were vital to capture the interviewees' off-the-record interactions in the notebook. Specifically, from January 2020 to December 2022, observations were made up until the stage at which the study's demands for data saturation were met.

The semi-structured leading open-ended questions served as the foundation for the in-depth interviews. Informant journalists and admin staff from six branch offices in Bahir Dar (head office), Gondar, Debre Markos, Addis Ababa, Debre Birhan and Dessie of AMC participated. There were eight leading questions (adapted from each HIM level) forwarded for eight journalists (J01–J08) and six admin workers (A01–A06), for a total of 14 media practitioners recorded for 18 hours. A journalist recorded the greatest time (1:45 hours), whereas a member of the admin staff recorded the shortest time (0:45 hours). The fundamental selection criterion for journalists and admin staff is based on their working experiences as an in-depth interview protocol which was six or more years working in AMC. Interviewing senior journalists and admin staffers enabled to explore the media organization's practice vividly. Further, this initial experience year was delineated due to the assumption that these journalists had two governmental admin exposures in the Ethiopian media landscape.

On the one hand, they were journalism practitioners during the EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) that ruled the country from 1991 to 2018 which brought a hostile environment for the free press (Workneh 2022b). In this regard, Lauk and Harro-Loi (2017, 1956) state that "periods of political and economic instability or crisis can bring about a breakdown in professional values, the loss of whole journalistic communities, and abrupt changes to journalistic practices, all of which have a detrimental impact on journalistic autonomy". On the other hand, these journalists were/are working in the "reformed government" starting from 2018 to the present that opened up loosening of restrictions on media and independent journalism-significant changes have been made to Ethiopia's contemporary media landscape in 2018-marked a period of political transition in the country. According to Kebede, Ali, and Moges (2022, 2023) there was relative freedom entertained and no jailed journalists were recorded at the beginning of the new "reform government" that came to power in 2018, but it did not last long. Similarly, Moges (2022) states the promising start and the window of hope for free media in Ethiopia were short-lived as the freedom of the media has deteriorated since then.

Put differently, semi-structured questions were forwarded as an interview guide approach to underpin journalist's experiences and perspectives deeply. As suggested by Creswell (2009), the more open-ended the questioning, the better as the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life settings; often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. The hierarchical arrangements and management that influenced journalists' professional freedom within the organizational hierarchies were the main emphasis of the analysis. This is because journalists were at the heart of AMC's structural role plays and journalistic content production. Besides, in-depth interviews with media managers and editors were conducted. These participants might describe what they felt inside during their managerial experiences. This enables to understand managers' and editor's supervisory roles and related challenges in their relations with journalists under them. This study looks into the social, political, organizational, interpersonal, and routine exposures and journalistic practices of journalists and admin staff at AMC. The researchers focus on the description or categorization of in-depth interviews and interpretations to explain major themes.

The data analysis was conducted for describing hierarchical influences and arrangements on journalist's professional duty. The collected interview data were passed through some

procedural developments (audio recording→transcribing/translating→coding→categorizing→minor themes→recoding→re-categorizing→emergingmajor themes for qualitative data enquiry) meticulously. Transcription was conducted from audio to written text in Amharic. Then, translation was made from Amharic to English. All of the interviewees spoke Amharic and some spoke other languages additionally. In order to avoid potential translation meaning distortions, it was important to include and work with legal translation experts from the Bahir Dar city administration. Then, the translated data was codified. Instead of using computer-assisted coding, it was all carried out manually for ease of access, control, flexibility and creativity to grasp the general essence of the data. The coding of the raw data was classified with tags and labels for categorizing themes accordingly. Different coders (trained) participated, who had expertise. This qualitative interpretation passed cycles of coding to reach the emerging major themes. The researchers made sense of all codes into categorized themes of patterns to arrive at the four major findings. Finally, to guarantee the output was precise or reliable, the data collection process followed certain qualitative reliability and face validation (credibility) protocols.

Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussion are combined. The in-depth interview questions include the hierarchical level issues and are analyzed independently. However, this article's main objective is to shed light on the main emerging media practices, journalistic role and autonomy within AMC rather than presenting each level of analysis. To this end, the following four major findings are discussed in line with the researchers' field notes and media documents available.

Partisan Media and Politicization of Journalism

The ownership of AMC plays a pivotal role in declaring journalists' professional practice and having a non-partisan media organization. AMC is under the supervision (funded and controlled) of the Amhara National Regional State (ANRS) and the federal government strictly. This issue aligns with Hanitzsch's (2011) claim that ownership of the media allows political influence over journalists most easily by the government body and the politicians. A key informant claimed that "as far as AMC is managed by the government budget, this has a direct effect. It is responsible to the regional council, and since the government considers AMC as its home, you cannot report on criticism of the government" (J07, 03 June 2022). In this extract, it is referred that AMC's political economy has a big impact on the content it produces. The regional council monitors AMC and hears media managers' reports about it, which has an impact on how it operates. Consequently, the government ownership impacts on AMC's journalism professional practices are visible. Similarly, scholars assert that the influence of ownership on media content in Ethiopia (e.g., Abayneh 2017; Abebe 2017; 2019; Befrdu 2012; Kebede, Ali, and Moges 2022; 2023; Kiflu, Ali, and Nigussie 2023; Mekonnen 2022; Moges 2017; Mohammed 2015; 2021; Stremlau 2011). The influence of the ruling ANRS or Amhara Prosperity Party (APP) on the media practices of AMC is abundantly experienced. Such a scenario according to Entman (2003) described as a *cascading activation model* of political

influence, from the powerful political actors to the media in a cascading process of influence.

The prominent manifestation is that the ANRS president appoints media managers directly, which implies media managers are directly under the ANRS's authority to manage AMC which is repeatedly underlined by journalists. This finding is similar to Mohammed's (2021) and Moges's (2017) findings except for the change in the controlling apparatus bodies (the chair of the board was from the government communication office (GCO), but now from the ruling regional party). In Mohammed's (2021) finding, all the managing boards of the state media houses are chaired by the heads or directors of the GCOs (federal and regional). The following excerpt demonstrates this claim.

Members of the media organization's board come from the ruling party, the opposition parties, and governmental organizations. However, because the ruling party has the most significant influence, the media managers are members of that party. As a result, the ruling party has two advantages. This is due to the fact that board members who represent government organizations also represent the ruling party's wings (J05, 28 April 2022).

The board members of AMC are dominated and chaired by the ruling party which shows how the state or ruling party wants AMC to maintain its political hegemony and the status quo firmly. This practice has leveraged the media organization as a strategy for consolidating the political hegemony of the ruling Ethiopian party. In this manner, in state-owned news organizations, the state usually finds its way to infiltrate editorial decisions (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013), and organizational aspects limit professional autonomy through ownership influences, management structures, and editorial decisions (Sjøvaag 2013).

More practically, political elites from the regional ruling APP have significant influences on how the media organization is managed and operated. The manager and his five deputies, who make up the top management team (see Figure 1), are used to demonstrate this which is declared on the proclamation as "the deputy managers of the corporation are recruited by the board and appointed by the ANRS president on the recommendation of the manager" (AMC Proclamation 2021). It shows how AMC's political connection is high when it comes to the management bodies. In this regard, Mellado and Humanes (2012) stress the level of management, professional experience, and news beat are the working conditions that better explain the perceived levels of autonomy. A reporter communicated that

the top five management leaders of the media organization are politicians. They set the agenda of the ruling party not the agenda of the media. Professional ethics such as honesty, balance, neutrality, etc are used when they are useful for the party's interest (J01, 13 March 2022).

The five deputy managers' role is mainly maintaining the political wings of the media organization (NB: the five deputy managers are placed between the editors and the media manager hierarchically, see Figure 1). In the utmost expression, journalists described these individuals as "selected or appointed not elected" based on the media administrative principles.

Paradoxically, the act of politically appointed media managers is against the AMC's Proclamation (2021) declaration of "journalists and administrative staff cannot be members of political parties". A key informant from the top management voiced "this practice

goes against what AMC proclaimed. We told these appointees that they are bad models; then after, there are some leaders who stopped that" (A005, 27 August 2022). It exemplifies the conflict between the AMC proclamation (2021) and the real operational circumstances of AMC. An ATV reporter claimed about the involvement of political entities in the assignment of media managers that "we see them [the manager and deputy managers] appointed" (J04, 17 March 2022). This shows the extent of political entities' hands to curve AMC's practices. Such media practice, according to Reich and Hanitzsch (2013), is regarded as a stronger influence of professional and newsroom conventions—an aspect of greater professional autonomy—journalists may perceive the limits imposed by media laws as further restrictions on their work.

Further, one of the admin staff confirmed this managerial assignment as "it is in direct contradiction to the proclamation" (A05, 27 August 2022), and it creates "extra-routines" on journalists to practice journalism professionally. These managers encourage politically motivated reports within and outside the media organization when media coverage is needed for the interest of the ruling party. One way to accomplish this would be to assign journalists with a political orientation of the ruling party in that position. In a similar manner, Mohammed (2021) found that governing the decision-making position of the Ethiopian state media is exercised by appointing members of the ruling party or party-affiliated journalists to the highest media management positions. Because of this, journalists seem to genuinely consider that the top managers are placed to consolidate the power balance of the ruling party, which demonstrates how professional journalism has become politicized in Ethiopia.

More on, the following excerpt illustrates how the politically assigned media managers impact journalists' professional autonomy and their journalistic integrity as "our complaints are with the politicians. They do not want to report about their party that appears to be unfavorable to its interests. There is a belief that safeguarding the party is just as important as defending the government" (J05, 28 April 2022). As evidenced by this excerpt, party members in notably have significant influence on contents. This result aligns with what Lewis and Westlund (2017) claim of journalism has largely been treated as a routinized media practice, one with institutionalized patterns of professional roles, working rules, and shared principles. Because this political party promotes opinionated and structural ideologies, political interests on AMC are almost always substantial, and journalists' professionalism matter notably. This result agrees with Himelboim and Limor (2010) that media in developing countries can help build the foundation for a democratic society by supporting government efforts, and lay the foundations for the press as a safeguard against corruption and misuse of power. This media practice ultimately highlights media coverage is not supposed to "harm or criticize" the reputation of the ruling party either directly or indirectly.

Further, journalists stressed that AMC's political orientation or leaning is substantially impacts their journalism practice more that the management body did. By virtue of its practice, journalists refer to AMC as partisan media organization. A radio journalist elaborated the political influences on the media organization as "in order to achieve its goal, there are situations where AMC leaning towards politics; it clearly works for the ruling party" (J001, 13 March 2022). As a consequence, political ambitions would compromise journalists' professional autonomy. In such scenario, according to Reich and Hanitzsch (2013), journalists who feel that their professional autonomy is limited also tend to

think that their work is influenced by political factors. This political orientation signifies organizational autonomy primarily has influential impacts on individual journalists' autonomy. In such analogy a study conducted on Voice of America's Amharic journalists by Workneh (2020) reported journalists highlight the significance of organizational legislative "firewall" and evidence-based external review process in upholding the newsroom's autonomy. Similar with the current findings, Mekonnen (2022) found politics has both direct and indirect influence on media content and the professionals' autonomy of AMC journalists. Hence the majority journalists primarily assert AMC favors Ethiopia's ruling PP. This is mainly achieved, implicitly and explicitly, with the help of the hands who work behind the scenes.

The contents journalists produce are wrecked of this political ideology. Indeed, this result approves Sjøvaag's (2013) argument individual and organizational autonomy are interrelated concepts, separating the two levels is no easy task, and Waisbord's (2013) assertion of journalism in authoritarian systems is typically subjugated to the imperatives of the ruling party. Ultimately, journalists' decision-making experience, mainly political issues, is intimidated by the top media managers. Many scholars concur journalists' professional autonomy is influenced by internal and external factors in their decision-making process within the newsroom (Hanitzsch et al. 2010; Mellado and Humanes 2012; Örnebring 2013; Preston 2009; Reich and Hanitzsch 2013; Shoemaker and Reese 2014; Sjøvaag 2013). Specifically, Kiflu, Ali, and Nigussie (2023) claimed that Ethiopian media is exposed to tendencies of strong state intervention. The ruling party wants AMC as a tool for its' political status quo. This leads to what Waisbord (2013) claims without autonomy, journalism is the mouthpiece of particular interests, and it becomes subjected to the whims of other powers. As a result, journalists' professional autonomy is limited when they cover political issues that equate criticizing the ruling party, directly or indirectly, is difficult in this local media. This agrees with Hamada (2022) that a small number of independent journalists may exist in non-democratic nations where press freedom is at its lowest and journalists lack the autonomy to publish free political investigative reports that criticize their governments, and Mekonnen (2022) who found journalists emphasized that the political situation of the country and the goodwill of the assigned leaders play the formative role for and against their autonomy. This scenario enables us to possibly conclude journalists' individual professional independence is bounded by the influences of interest groups, mainly political, in AMC.

The other facet of the AMC's political economy is the politicization of journalism. Some journalists support political parties subtly; particularly those who support the ruling PP. Journalists seem frequently pressured to report news in a way that endorses the ruling party's position. Journalists who refuse to follow "instructions" might have their positions revoked; in essence, they are replaced by other journalists with political leanings. This supports Deuze and Prenger (2019) assertion that making media professional puts practitioners in a field of sometimes complimentary and often competing pressures and forces. In other words, managers and supporting journalists of the ruling party are obvious in the development of political content for the media. This result is consistent with Mohammed's (2021, 17) finding as "journalists affiliated to the ruling party are perceived as showing more closeness and loyalty to the government than those who are not. Reporting of politically sensitive issues is often given exclusively to the party members". Instead of taking into account a reporter's growing skill as a journalist, assignments are made based on their political

inclinations. These journalists are described as propagandists, lapdogs/guard dogs, opportunist facilitators/collaborative-facilitative who promote official policies, cooperate with those in power, protect the status quo, present a positive image of political and commercial leadership or they embrace the role tend to be defensive of authorities and routinely engage in self-censorship (refer Donsbach and Patterson 2004; Hanitzsch 2005, 2011, 2017, 2018; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; 2018; Mellado and Van Dalen 2014; Mellado 2019).

In this connection, the opportunist facilitator journalists are common among those working for state-owned media and are predominately working in developing and transitional countries, and their manifestation is they take sides and do so in a consistent, substantial, and aggressive way (Donsbach and Patterson 2004; Hanitzsch 2011). However, the media proclamation extends if a journalist finds a member of a political party, he or she may be fired from the post as

any journalist or technician working in the corporation was forbidden to be a member of a political organization, to participate in political activities, to reflect his own political views in his work or to advance his personal position in any other way (AMC Proclamation 2021).

A journalist could be ideologically affiliated with a political party's objectives and goals, but he or she should not be a registered member of any political party; if he or she wants to be, he or she has to leave the job as a journalist in AMC. Despite the fact that they are not allowed to join or be members of any political parties within the media organization, journalists are implicitly involved in it. In this regard, a key informant stated that "a journalist may have a political opinion, but it cannot be reflected in the media organization" (A03, 16 August 2022). It is widely believed that these journalists implicitly support political parties in their journalism profession endeavors. Regardless of their level of competence, journalists have been deliberately assigned to cover issues related to politics.

These journalists have a political mission to achieve in favor of their political opinions which scholars depict such roles performance as "journalism of opinion or active-advocate missionary" (Donsbach and Patterson 2004; Köcher 1986). Contextually, journalists of such type are characterized as *mission deliverers* or opportunist facilitators. To demonstrate the routines of journalists' political attachment at mission, journalists that prioritize their bosses' interests instead of the values of their profession: "for me, journalism in AMC is more of a mission than just a profession" (J02, 14 March 2022). Selected reporters and camera crews are assigned to cover prominent political leaders, events and occasions as part of the media organization's preferred aims. In this respect, an interviewee claimed "there are party members who are also journalists" (A03, 16 August 2022) which reveals AMC's proclamation is not authentically implemented. Practically, some journalists deliver the mission of political parties and politicians. Related to this, journalists could promote their partisan values is to seek a position with a news organization that subscribes to the same values (Donsbach and Patterson 2004). In conclusion, it is possible to refer to AMC as partisan media because of its operational mandate, and the political apparatuses in charge of these practices.

The Contemporary Flip-Flop Media Practice

The expression flip flop is a technical expression used to show the swinging culture of media practice in which media organizations attach with the party that has come and

gone in Ethiopia. Flip flop could be defined as a state of making an abrupt reversal of policy, practice and working environment (Oxford Dictionary Online 2006). Thus flip flop demonstrates the inconsistent and lack of firmed organizational stances of media practice professionally and ethically. AMC changes its practice instantly based on the status of the governments/parties due to the media organization's political orientation influences. Journalists are repetitively concerned about lack of clear media strategy that creates fertile ground for the government to entertain its agenda rather than AMC's own agenda. According to a senior journalist "most of the media organization's agenda is being shaped in terms of the ruling party's interests" (J06, 04 May 2022). Further, an admin informant stated "in the current political scenario of Ethiopia, we believe most of the government media organizations are biased towards the ruling government" (A05, 27 August 2022). These extracts highlight the influence of the ruling government on shaping the content and agenda of media organizations based on cycles and sporadic events. The media's organizational working environment becomes prone to the seasonal twisting of events.

As a result, the majority of the AMC agenda is constituted of sporadic or occasional events. Similarly, Mekonnen (2022) found that the extent of professional autonomy at AMC is dependent on the situation; the nature of stories and the country's political situation play a vital role for and against professionalism. The AMC's agenda is usually dominated by seasonal burning issues based on social media (Facebook) tempos, government policies, goals, directives and implementations. The media practice of Ethiopia's AMC dances with the tune of the political shift drums of the government, and it develops a syndrome of event-oriented reporting. In line with this finding, Mohammed (2021) reported that news reports are highly event-oriented. This makes AMC to experience seasonal excellence. The political influence through managers executes this sporadic agenda come into effect. Then, persistent and consistent organizational values slightly lack. In this regard, Behailu (2022) reported that the media environment is highly swinging alongside the political rhythms of the country. This is the nature of media practice which events are customarily covered and emphasized for promotion and politicization purposes.

The context and timing of media operations seem to influence the journalistic content and practice in Ethiopia. This is the influence of the seasonal political tempo of the country. This happened especially during the serious political instability and ruptures brought by regime shifts or changes. In this connection, Kebede, Ali, and Moges (2022; 2023) came across journalists' autonomy in the Ethiopian media industry influxes depending on the status of the government. This does not necessarily mean AMC should be change-resistant. In this sense, Sjøvaag (2013), however, suggested that there is a caution that the fluctuating issue has been to what extent journalists follow professional norms and rules blindly, or if they indeed have any effect upon the rules that constitute practice. Sometimes flexibility might be tolerated in media practice as far as it does not damage the journalists' professional integrity and the society at large. In support, Deuze and Prenger (2019) claim flexibility is an essential principle of media work that permeates all descriptions of what it's like to be a successful professional media creator.

The uncertain implementation of media documents is the other contemporary manifestation of media practice in Ethiopia's AMC. The application of these documents is the point of contention among journalists and admin staff within the media organization. Conceptually, media laws and regulations guarantee freedom and independence to

journalists, and the rules, norms and policies of professionalism condition news judgment (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013; Sjøvaag 2013). It is complained the editorial policy of AMC is quite old. An admin staff stated, “it does not go with the times” (A05, 12 August 2022). This document has started implementation since 2011 and its scope in terms of political-economics in 2011 and 2022/23 is very different. Journalists agree with the editorial policy’s standard with some contextual matters as “the editorial policy is an international standard one” (A01, 12 August 2022).

However, journalists criticize as it lacks to address the current state of media prospects, challenges, and the ability to adequately address the present media practices. In this manner, Sjøvaag (2013) asserts autonomous practice is restricted by newsroom policies, media legislation, and professional norms and conventions. Further, the editorial policy is not in-practice genuinely. As a vacillating nature, the actual practice is invisibly sheltered by unwritten rules or ritual enactments in newsrooms rather than being explicitly specified in either the editorial policy or proclamation. Therefore, the ritual enactments and unstated rules get substantial grounds on the journalism practices. In support of this conclusion, Shoemaker and Reese (2014) affirm that journalists learn unwritten policies through experience, by observing the kinds of stories used by the organization and through a process of socialization to the norms of the organization. While they try to conduct their reporting in line with professional standards, journalists frequently are shown to be deliberately violating significant justifications.

Regarding sources, the dominant sources journalists and AMC used are from political officials and government offices. A journalist stated, “Government agenda takes a higher share than AMC’s agenda” (J01, 13 March 2022). The majority of the media content sources are from government/party entities in Ethiopia. In a similar finding, Lowrey and Erzikova (2013) found that in Russia, the regional government wields power over newspapers by controlling access to revenue, as well as to official sources of information. Journalists confirm they usually wait the government officials to announce to make news as news. In such a case, Shoemaker and Reese (2014) assure that the higher a news organization was in the political hierarchy, the more it enjoyed access to news sources. This local media practice in Ethiopia implies journalists are not in a position to decide what to cover and report, but things are performed based on the political elite’s will. However, according to Deuze (2005), a core aspect of professional knowledge is sourcing, which includes or excludes news actors in the media. In opposite, the role of PR officers in content production has significantly declined. This result is against Mohammed’s (2015; 2021) findings that PR officers and practitioners are increasingly controlling the content of state broadcast media in Ethiopia.

To sum up, the political system of Ethiopia does have impacts on the contemporary media practices that make AMC accustomed to the seasonal excellence practice. This conclusion is supported by Abebe (2019) and Kiflu, Ali, and Nigussie (2023) as the Ethiopian media landscape can be or has been characterized or marked by unstable environment. This trend seems to influence journalism practice which Sjøvaag’s (2013) argues as journalism is practiced within the boundaries of the institution, professional autonomy is negotiated within an institutional context. A shifting temporary agenda put journalists’ professional autonomy and roles in jeopardy. Similarly, Mekonnen (2022) reported the extent of professional autonomy at AMC is dependent on the situation; the nature of stories and the country’s political situation plays a vital role for and against

professionalism. The media practice becomes a flip flop that twists, oscillates, and dances with the political drum-beating tunes of Ethiopia's political continuum. It is possible to conclude that the media practice, journalistic role and autonomy are falling behind and oscillating based on the interests of the ruling party of their reigns. Therefore, the political transition and shift in Ethiopia have caused major rifts in the journalism industry.

Outsourcing: A Program Silencing Professional Journalism Practice

Outsourcing is the act of selling media airtimes from AMC to different organizations within the allotted broadcast time. The outsourced programs' commercial imperatives have an impact on journalistic integrity in AMC's content production. According to Shoemaker and Reese (2014, 123) "in any case, the economics of the media market place are an ongoing concern for research". It is found that the owners of outsourced programs are ANRS bureaus, city/town administrations and universities such as Bahir Dar city and Debre Birhan town administrations, ANRS Labor and Training Bureau, ANRS Revenue Authority, Amhara Culture and Tourism Bureau, Amhara Education Bureau; Bahir Dar University, University of Gondar, Debre Markos University, Wollo University, Debre Tabor University and Injibara University. These organization's leaders, mayors or university presidents are assigned by government officials, and they are not free from the influence of the government. It is possible to state that the hierarchical influences of the political elites of the ruling party are imminent on the contents of these programs.

It is observed that any government organization can have an outsourced program as long as it pays AMC for the program that broadcasts for 30 minutes over 52 weeks of the budget year. Having programs that are outsourced is an increasingly emerging trend; currently, there are 12 active outsourced programs. Among the current outsourced programs are the following: *Mahdere-Wollo* (Wollo University), *Finote-Gafat* (Debre Tabor University), *Maede-A'emiro* (University of Gondar), *Gebiyachin* (ANRS Revenue Authority), *Yetena Fert* (Bahir Dar city administration), *Meskote-Tibeb* (Bahir Dar University), and *Tibebe-Zagwe* (Injibara University). For instance, *Yetena Fert*, literally means "The Diamonds of Lake Tana", of Bahir Dar city administration broadcasts mainly infrastructure developments, planned projects and tourism attraction cites in the city and its' surroundings. It usually does not present maladministration issues and public complains genuinely.

Both the broadcaster (AMC) and owners of outsourced programs are annually funded either by the regional state or the federal government. In this connection, Shoemaker and Reese (2014, 126) affirm that "media corporations are most often interlocked with financial institutions, and this may have serious consequences for media corporations that are bought out with the cooperation of financial institutions". Organizations have self-interest intentions and aspirations. To achieve this goal, the outsourcing platform creates unprecedentedly fertile ground for them to silence the possible critic from the journalists, media organizations and the public at large. Key informants stated "mostly, organizations buy airtimes for building their images" (A04, 17 August 2022), and "outsourced airtime programs can never broadcast their organizations' weaknesses in any way possible; they literally say that we do not allow our airtime to insult us" (J04, 17 March 2022). Such unprofessional disparities raise the contestation of journalism practice in AMC.

Organizations invest in airtime in order to emphasize and cover their success stories. A study conducted by Gessesse (2020, 14) reported "the application of journalists'

knowledge of professional principles appears to be impeded by organizational interferences which are usually intended to influence the news narratives towards the interests of the political elites". This is the fundamental drawback of programs that are outsourced which lack professionalism. For example, "outsourcing is an obstacle to professional journalism practices" (A03, 16 August 2022), and "the journalism profession is seriously impacted by outsourced programs" (J07, 03 June 2022). Thus, it is found that organizations buy airtime mostly when AMC journalists try to file and report weaknesses. Then they immediately own programs in their names,

I once did an investigative type report on X organization. Then, they said why do not we buy airtime and run it ourselves if the media is 'defaming' the name of our organization? After that, they purchased airtime, and everything is now reported in accordance with their preferences (J05, 28 April 2022).

This reveals owners typically cover success stories in their airtimes and purposefully downplay their weaknesses. This initiative demonstrates the distinctive feature of Ethiopian government-owned media organizations is success storytelling oriented (Abayneh 2017; Befrdu 2012; Moges 2017; Mohammed 2015; 2021). This status quo is maintained through the outsourced programs. All of these exist because program owners have a sole interest, as a reporter communicated "they clearly said that, instead of publicizing our organization's problems, we attempt to boost its reputation" (J06, 04 May 2022). These organizations' objective is to boost their reputations and subjects of interest.

This result is consistent with Mohammed's (2021) finding that image building is one of the major goals of PRs' organizational efforts. Typically, they favor the interests of the powerful elites while excluding the interests of the public at large. Intentionally, outsourced programs are used as PR for an organization's image-building aspirations,

I believe that initiatives that are outsourced lack professionalism and are already driving media attention to PR. You will make money if it is fair and impartially delivered, and the media organization will expand. But if you are working to make money, it will not be that way (J01, 13 March 2022).

But journalism is not a pure disseminator of news from the political system; it is far away from acting as a PR agency of politics (Blöbaum 2014). Basically, this practice dismays the principal essence of newsroom independence stated by Lauk and Harro-Loi (2017, 1960) "at the organizational level, newsrooms should be free from commercial and political constraints".

Outsourcing is the main triggering factor in practicing journalism professionalization negatively. These programs degrade, denigrate and erode journalism professionalism. Admin staff explained "to put it bluntly, it is a big obstacle for journalism professionalism" (A05, 27 August 2022), and "outsourcing programs have had a profound impact on the journalism profession" (A03, 16 August 2022). This shows journalists do not have autonomy over the content. In AMC outsourcing is impactful and challenging for professional journalistic content production. The pressure comes from the program owners that gravely threaten the independence of journalists. These extracts: "why are you criticizing my organization with my own money?" (A03, 16 August 2022), and "we will terminate our contract if you report an issue we do not want" (J07, 03 June 2022). This platform enables the program owners to have control over the professional jurisdiction of journalists. This

finding is in line with Shoemaker and Reese (2014) that organizational influences may distort journalists' ability to objectively describe the world, and a fiercely independent journalistic culture may be inconsistent with corporate goals.

Controversially, the organizations' PRs set the agenda, frame the contents, and make editorial processes. This practice erodes the notion claimed by Skovsgaard et al. (2013, 27) that "news emerges by itself and the journalist has a non-interventional function". In such a respect, the journalists' role would be to follow the instructions from the organizations' PRs and officials. Similarly, Mohammed (2015; 2021) found that government PR officers are used as the sole and most important source of information. This trend leads to failure in objective reports which is the cornerstone for journalistic content production, but outsourced programs accustom subjectivity and unbalanced or one-sided story narrations and violating basic journalism professionalism in AMC. This finding is congruent with McChesney's (2003) assertion that the news media's commercial landscape is creating a crisis in journalism, wherein deteriorating levels of journalistic autonomy are potentially damaging to democracy. The professional integrity of journalists seems seriously challenged. The routines created by government organizations notably impact journalists' content production, and journalists face actual obstacles from content suppliers when they visit various organizations for reporting.

When journalists contact them at their convenience to cover issues, for instance, government organizations consider AMC as an integral part of the government body. The following extract clarified this "a government official considers AMC as his own organization only because it is allocated funding from the government budget. He takes it as the mouthpiece of the government. You are required to broadcast organizations' positive news; journalism is no longer a free profession" (J07, 03 June 2022). It is clear from this text that government organizations regard AMC as a type of government organization. This leads individuals to assume that they have the authority to influence journalists who write stories in accordance with the desires of these organizations' officials. The media organization and these organizations have a conflict of interest, and its reputation is seemingly becoming weakened. This is due to the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) they signed does not acknowledge the professional independence that the media organization and journalists should be granted. The MoU provides limited or no professional explanations of how contents are reported or the role and autonomy that the media organization plays in the process. It gives veto power to the owners as stated in the document "the programs' subject matter and expertise are prepared by a contractor; a baseline program plan is given by a contractor" (MoU²). In consequence, the programs that are outsourced have become susceptible, exposing journalists to create content whatever these organizations prefer. In essence, the freedom of expression of journalists, and the role and autonomy of professional content creation seem to be in trouble.

Additionally, because of the interference to write up positive reports, these officials do not permit journalists to compile balanced products based on their professional skills. This result is aligned with Waisbord (2013, 44) that "without autonomy, journalism is the mouthpiece of particular interests, and becomes subjected to the whims of other powers". The room for independent investigative and balanced reporting is almost closed and virtually impossible. Principally and ethically, journalists should stand and speak out against maladministration, corruption, organizational wrongdoings, failures, and public complaints. It is stated journalism's role as a critical watchdog is also important

for the creation of trust in the political system (Blöbaum 2014). The inter-marriage between AMC and the program owners in outsourced programs silences not only critical reporting but professional journalistic reporting. The deal is held between the two organizations and journalists are stake in the middle. This assures economic influences on journalistic autonomy may therefore be seen as a systemic factor rather than a direct effect (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013). Hence outsourced programs do not give room for independent journalistic production. This shows according to Mellado (2019) in countries with less press freedom, there is a notable gap between journalistic ideals and professional practices.

Outsourcing is utilized as a tool to silence critics of poor leadership, wrongdoings, inefficiencies, corruption, and investigations. A journalist asserted “we are not insulted or criticized by the reports we pay for. Because they are paying you, they do not want you to bring up anything unfavorable about their organizations” (J07, 03 June 2022). This existing scenario strongly agrees with McChesney (2003, 302) “professional norms and practices of journalism result in news that maintain and legitimize the existing political order”. This vicious draconian practice is against the anchor principle of journalism professionalism’s aspiration *Voice to the Voiceless*. The culture of unscrupulous media practices in outsourced programs is consistently disapproved of and criticized by the journalists and admin staff. The outsourced programs’ commercial imperatives have an impact on journalistic integrity in AMC’s content production. Though from the AMC’s top management perspective outsourcing served as a revenue source to strengthen its internal revenue generation and pays for miscellaneous expenses, it is mainly used to highly influence professional practice and autonomy practically. It is possible to declare that the hierarchical influences of the political elites/organizations of the ruling party/government are the living experience of journalists and the imminent culture on the contents of outsourced programs in AMC.

Journalists’ Safety as a Grim Reality

Journalists voiced concerns about the working conditions and safety in AMC when they were interviewed to address individual-level analyses of how their specific roles and tasks influenced the content they produced. But this does not mean this scenario is not raised in other hierarchical-level analyses. In this respect, Westlund, Krøvel, and Skare Orgeret (2022, 3) state “journalists recurrently face safety risks in the course of their work is nothing new”. Safety should be understood as a holistic approach that contains three components: physical, digital and psychosocial (Media4Democracy 2020). The challenges facing the journalism profession globally are the safety and the impunity issues of journalists from harassment, intimidation, assault, violence, death threats and prosecution. Different kinds of perpetrators harass, threaten, frighten, harm and attack media actors: public officials, political leaders and their supporters, demonstrators, religious groups, militias/armed groups, criminal organizations and trolls, intelligence agencies, security forces and agents, or even media regulators (IWMF 2016; Media4Democracy 2020; Orgeret and Tayeebwa 2020; Mitchell 2022). The safety of journalists is a global concern (Orgeret and Tayeebwa 2020).

Established in 2020 and launched in January 2021, the Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists in Africa is an online platform that aims to

promote journalist safety and counter impunity for crimes against them via monitoring, reporting and follow-up by both duty and rights bearers (Mitchell 2022). However, this initiative is not strong and fruitful in the continent to the extent of making journalists' life protection active. According to CPJ reports, the safety of journalists in Africa is alarming including Ethiopia. The safety of journalists in Ethiopia is volatile. This is related to the press freedom the nation entertained. It is quite formidable to look at CPJ reports from when Abiy Ahmed, Prime Minister of Ethiopia, came to power in 2018 and the current status of press freedom and the safety of journalists in Ethiopia.

³Under Abiy, Ethiopia's media have more freedom but challenges remain. In 2018- for the first time in 14 years-CPJ recorded no journalists behind bars in its annual census. Journalists in Ethiopia also still face the risk of attack (CPJ, 29 April 2019). Some journalists are leaving the country amid threats and intimidation by the government and non-state actors, both online and offline. Recently, Ethiopian officials revoked the license of a journalist accredited to work for *The Economist* (CPJ, 29 April 2022).

Above, both sample reports present a mix of promising, desperation and disillusioned senses. It is idiomatically coined here as *The Tale of Two Aprils* (29 April 2019 and 2022). Around 2019, CPJ hoped and thought that press freedom would revive like in the 1990s, but it has been getting frustrating declined recently in 2022. Similarly, Abebe (2019) hoped the coming of Abiy Ahmed as a reformist PM would bring significant change in the country ... many of the events which have unfolded in the post-Abiy Ahmed era may have a different set of media and politics relations that warrants a separate study. Further, Workneh (2020, 5) states "the current PM Abiy Ahmed and his associates have taken promising reforms that resulted in a budding free press, release of political prisoners, and restoration of constitutionally granted civil liberties". In the post-reform period, some of the obstacles that existed prior to the reform were changed, and media freedom was better safeguarded in relative terms (Tufa and Dejene 2022). But in his latest article, Workneh understood the media practice and journalists' safety as grim realities by analyzing ethnic-based media outlets as "othering of journalists is observed across multiple interrelated layers of regionalism, ethnic identity, and national origin" (Workneh 2020, 10). Currently the scenario is not as it is promised in the reform process.

The perspectives of the journalists in Ethiopia on how the prevailing safety concerns impact their lives and the journalistic products they produce are explored in this accordance. A journalist complained "because AMC does not even treat me as I am the one who reported difficult graphic content news from the war front and developed a post-traumatic syndrome. AMC treated me badly. So I decided to leave the corporation" (J05, 28 April 2022). This journalist develops a traumatic situation after reporting disturbing graphic content from the war zones, but AMC does approach him/her to settle the psychological trauma experienced on the war fronts. In such and other cases, AMC does not have a strategy to address this issue, and this leads the journalist to consider leaving this media organization. Studies indicate journalists' vulnerability and exposure to violent or traumatic events such as war reporting, and managerial or organizational care usually determine their stay or leave in that media organization. Reporters suffer psychological trauma after harassment, imprisonment, and torture (Waisbord 2019, 212). Beam and Spratt (2009) found the more journalists believed that showing signs of

emotional distress would hurt their chances for advancement at their news organization, the lower their job satisfaction.

Contemporarily, journalists seem to exhibit frustration, vulnerability and persistent political pressure in their journalism job in Ethiopia. This finding agrees with Westlund, Krøvel, and Skare Orgeret (2022, 1823) that “the safety of journalists and journalism is a problem”. Consequently, the psychological contract between the individual journalists and the media organization in their reporting safety matters most. Usually, the traditional approaches are applied to address the security of journalists in AMC. The journalists’ safety and security emphasized by an admin staff affirmed “AMC lacks journalists’ safety procedures and guidelines, however, it is permissible to let your immediate supervisor recognize when you are in a difficult situation and request assistance, customarily” (A04, 17 August 2022). In this statement, it is possible to infer AMC has no documents that safeguard journalists’ security. During life-threatening and working inconsistencies and difficulties in the fields, the media administrators, editors-in-chief and editors are contacted and called to deal with the challenges customarily and ritually. This practice is similar to Venter’s (2005) finding journalists do practice by their own custom-made strategies to protect themselves. Moreover, an admin staff explains the quest of backing organizational safety pact that is still not addressed which is asserted as follows regarding the safety and life insurance of journalists.

A journalist is not guaranteed if something is going to happen to his life while he is working in the field. For example, if a journalist working for a battlefield report injures or dies, nothing will be done for his family. According to AMC’s operating principles, there is no such thing as a guarantee for the family of a journalist, unless it is supported by kindness (A03, 16 August 2022).

This elaborates on the extent journalists face in their life insurance. There is no designated beneficiary sum of money upon the death of the insured journalist. There is no operational and principal document that guarantees journalist’s lives and families; hence, journalists are not protected in AMC. The existence of desperation for safety affects journalists’ professional reporting habits. Journalists regularly endure threats, intimidation, and abuse in the course of their work meant to frighten, harm, and ultimately silence them (IWMF 2016). Journalists in Western democratic societies enjoy formidable legal protections, have considerable access to those in power, and are backed by substantial news organizations (Donsbach and Patterson 2004). It is suggested the protection and safety of journalists should be essential components of national human rights and development plans, and an effective approach to the safety of journalists requires the sharing of good practices on the prevention, protection and prosecution of crimes against journalists (OCHA 2017; UNESCO 2022).

The existence of desperation for safety affects journalists’ professional reporting habits. Under such conditions, it is almost impossible to run an investigative type of reporting and play a watchdog role. This claim is consistent with Waisbord (2022) that threats to safety drive journalists to self-censorship and to use extreme caution. The safety concern makes journalists reporting in fields and exposing maladministration in the form of investigation very difficult and dangerous in Ethiopia. For instance, the next excerpt perhaps demonstrates how well journalists are safeguarded in AMC.

I visited a particular district. It was a corruption case that I did it vividly. The chief administrator then inquired and informed me that he wanted to have dinner with me on Thursday. It is my

pleasure, I noted. On Wednesday morning, I left the area, and I delivered the news on Thursday. Then he called me and asked if I was still there. I informed him that I had departed the district. He ended the call after becoming irate. He had 70,000 birr ready for me when I checked back eventually. There would be no trouble if I took the cash and erased the engraving. However, if I flatly refused the money, an assassin would be sent to kill me (*J05, 28 April 2022*).

This excerpt amply illustrates the degree to which AMC journalists face life-threatening challenges while disclosing public cases of incompetent administration and corruption issues, like the money presented to the journalist to erase by the official. The media organization does not provide journalists with life insurance, nor does it protect them from trouble with a legally binding security pact. The working conditions and safety of media personnel are not guaranteed by AMC. Similarly, Kiflu, Ali, and Nigussie (2023) reported that journalists have reservations in fear of reprisals, and discussants do not reflect what they believe is true as critical individuals do not access the media and their opinions censored. Journalists self-censored to escape dangerous perpetrators reprisals from the government and powerful people. In this connection, Moges (2017, 217) discussed that “self-censorship on some issues is due to the role given to the media by the state”. Because of their fear of being penalized for covering controversial topics, journalists have started to self-censor as a result. Mengistu (2014) found that censorship and self-censorship are routinely practiced. The following excerpt demonstrates that personal intimacy, privacy and related conflict of interest do matter to an investigative journalist not to proceed with the planned investigative reports she/he had to do.

The planned investigative work was to be conducted on a wealthy man who was my relative and my family were intimate with him. When I understand this, I decline not conduct this work. If I go on with the investigative program ahead, things will not be good for me and my family; then I will present an objection and let others do it (*J04, 17 March 2022*).

It shows how journalists face threats and intimidation against their professional practice. Surprisingly, AMC did not proceed with lawsuits of such incidents. As violence against and harassment of journalists goes unpunished, the problem persists and even increases; if real legal consequences exist, perpetrators may think twice before committing such acts (IWMF 2016). This reporter feared her or his family’s relationship with the investigated wealthy man, and considered, as an ordinary individual the outcome in one way or another that might affect her private affairs significantly. Similarly, in his examination of Filipino journalists, Høiby (2020) found that local journalists are entangled by their visibility and close (family and/or business) relations inside their community, making them unable to cover certain issues of high importance to society. Conventionally, safety is vital for those who practice journalism, for their families, and for their sources; unfortunately, journalists and their sources are repeatedly subject to attacks that threaten the safety of their practice, their technological infrastructures, and the psychological and physical safety of individual persons (Westlund, Krøvel, and Skare Orgeret 2022, 1813). Moreover, an admin staff affirmed investigative reporting as “AMC is still far from creating favorable conditions for producing investigative reports” (A03, 16 August 2022). It is far worse because AMC has insignificant protection for its employed journalists as many journalists raised the issue with the highest caution. Therefore, conducting investigative reports and fixing safety concerns are still in their infancy.

This potentially leads to status journalistic freedom and the protection of journalists' professional autonomy into downgraded level. In such conditions, scholars affirm that autonomy has been valued as an essential factor safeguarding journalistic credibility, as it presumes journalists' independence from external pressures and complete loyalty to the public (Larson 1977 cited in Lauk and Harro-Loi 2017; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001). However, the safety condition of AMC journalists is against the life guarantee of employees; it is at the lowest level. It is the responsibility of AMC to protect, ensure and safeguard journalists' safety and security in order to foster the healthy advancement of professional journalism in the organization. The High Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism (2013) preaches that journalists must be able to work in an environment which allows for free expression and provides the journalist with the assurance that they can work free from pressure, interdictions, harassment, threats or even actual harm. Such poignant development in journalism career would lead journalists to face professional animosity and the elusiveness of professional journalistic role and autonomy in AMC.

Conclusions and Practical Implications

This article seeks to explore how journalists negotiate with their journalistic role and autonomy in the hierarchical influences landscape while practicing professional journalism. The study used the Hierarchy of Influences Model (HIM) to investigate the real-life practice of journalism at the endogenous systematic levels within the Ethiopian media, by taking AMC as a case. Factors that shape journalists' professionalism, autonomy and role are the main themes in these processes. The fluctuating nature of media practice depending on the political tempo of the country affects have established media practice platform. The outsourced programs are considered by journalists as the platform of non-professional journalistic products are created, processed and broadcasted. Outsourced programs are observed as the predominant influencing factor of the media content. It is implicated that the media managers' assignment, outsourced programs, fluctuating media nature and safety issues negatively impacted journalists' professional content production. It is significantly conceivable to conclude that depending on the situation of the government, the role and autonomy of journalists and the media practice are in a constant flux in the Ethiopian media context.

This implies that these organizational practices affect the professional autonomy and journalism integrity significantly. Such a scenario could ultimately impact journalists' content creation and production drastically downwards. Further, journalists' protection and safety issue is found at the lowest corridor status. In these respects, Hamada (2022, 16) finds that "professional autonomy and safety are enabled and restricted at macro national political level as well as micro individual perception level". This influence makes professional reporting tremendously challenging prospect. The media practice in Ethiopia is on the contested terrain of journalists' role and autonomy as a consequence of all these practical challenges. Practically, this study makes a significant contribution to the exploration of media sociology in Ethiopia and suggests recognizing those actors who have influences on how journalists produce their content. In addition, the study enables media practitioners and policymakers to develop strategies to strengthen the role and autonomy of journalists, encourage ethical reporting, and defend journalists' rights against censorship, intimidation, harassment, and imprisonment.

Notes

1. *The Ethiopian Media Authority: Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021 on 5th April 2021, Addis Ababa.*
2. *The MoU for Outsourcing or Sponsorship between AMC and Organizations, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia.*
3. *Committee to Protect Journalists: Reports on Ethiopia (CPJ, 2019 & 2022).*

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