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# Framing the Public Sphere in the Ethiopian Media: An Analysis of Newspaper OP-ED Sections

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## Abstract

*This study examines the framing of Ethiopia's 2018 governmental reform in the op-ed sections of four selected newspapers – state-owned Addis Zemen and Ethiopian Herald and privately owned Addis Admas and The Reporter – by applying the theoretical framework of media framing. Drawing on methodological insights from textual analysis, 24 op-eds were read to understand how the reform was presented through the selection of contributors and the presentation of competing frames in the media. The study reveals that the reform is framed differently in the selected media via topics, dominant themes, sources cited, or a combination of these devices. Contrary to the original purpose of the op-ed column, the analysis reveals a significant gap. Not varied perspectives are found in the process of discussion, as the op-eds in each media outlet are framed using a limited set of interpretations derived from two dominant frames: responsibility and binary frames. Textual analysis further reveals that these frames manifest through distinct subframes. Specifically, the state-owned Addis Zemen and The Ethiopian Herald employ a societal-level responsibility frame, whereas the privately published Addis Admas and The Reporter shift the focus to individual accountability. Regarding binary framing, Addis Admas, Addis Zemen, and The Ethiopian Herald consistently portray the reform positively, while The Reporter adopts an anti-reform stance in the binary frame. These findings suggest a media landscape characterized by deficient discursive diversity and a tendency towards interpretive homogenization and polarization in the media. This gap between the ideal of diverse public discourse and the reality of limited framing practices suggests the critical role media outlets play in shaping public understanding of complex political events such as Ethiopia's 2018 reform.*

**Keywords:** Ethiopia; reform; newspaper; op-ed; framing; public sphere

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The appearance of a reform on Ethiopia's political landscape in 2018 and the subsequent relative media freedom provided Ethiopians with a transient public sphere in the national media, fostering a sense of open dialogue and critical engagement (Melaku et al., 2020). The 2018 national reform marked a significant milestone in advancing media freedom. This unprecedented transformation in media practices was mainly attributed to the widening of the political space and the relaxation of state-controlled media. Illustrating this dramatic shift, a popular saying circulated among the people about the "U-turn" state-owned media activity: ኔታ ሆይ እባክህ የእኔንም ሕይወት እንደ ኢቴሺ ቀይረው (May God changes my life as happened to Ethiopian Television), suggesting the "U-turn" change of the state media outlet practices.

The reform brought significant changes to the country's socio-political environment, as evidenced by the revision of repressive media laws, the release of jailed journalists, and the unblocking of opposition websites (Davinson, 2020; Melaku et al., 2020). The reform process became a salient national issue, attracting Ethiopians to voice their views and perspectives, particularly in mediated settings. The political climate following the 2018 reform draws remarkable parallels to the early days of the Derg regime and the post-1991 political transition (Meseret, 2013). For example, between 1974 and 1976, the early Derg period was marked by temporary vibrancy, in which the press entertained freedom of expression and public discourse (Skjerdal, 2012). Similarly, the 1991 to 1995 transition period witnessed relative media freedom, including the emergence of the country's first private publication (Shimels, 2000).

Despite its transformative potential, the 2018 reform agenda has several limitations. Some have argued that certain measures presented under the guise of reform actually functioned to consolidate government control over the media (Kiflu & Nigussie, 2025). A notable example was the June 30, 2018, shutdown of the Ethiopian News Network (ENN), a popular private news outlet (The Reporter, 2018). While the government cited regulatory reasons, the move was widely perceived as retaliation for the network's failure to provide a favorable coverage of the reform agenda. Another instance of government interference was the suspension of the popular Amharic satirical sitcom, *Min Litazez* on FANA Television. The program was reportedly pulled due to arbitrary criteria, such as character names mirroring those of high-ranking reformist officials (The Reporter, 2024), signaling the persistent curtailment of artistic and political expression. These incidents underscore the persistent tension between the promise of democratic openness and the reality of state-controlled media.

## 2 JOURNAL AND PUBLIC SPHERE

The days when the function of mass media was largely limited to disseminating objective news stories are long gone. The advent of mass media technologies in the twentieth century with the expansion of commentary and interpretation has transformed the role of mass media in society (Krumholz & Calavita, 2003), providing open forums for the expression of audience experience, expertise, and opinion, which have become essential journalistic functions. Media outlets fulfill this role through the notion of the "constructivist view of journalism," which is disputed by the principles of objective and value-free journalism. This view argues that knowledge is the result of an internal or subjective cognition process, shaped by what we choose to think about and how we choose to think about it (Loum, 2007). This view of journalism creates a public sphere in which the public participates by applying interpretive frameworks to understand common issues. Supporting this, McNair (2009) asserts that one of the things that journalism must provide is the public sphere; and it is with the expansion of the public sphere that interpretation has become an even more crucial element of the journalistic function.

A variety of pressures have forced the evolution of newspaper journalism from objective news reporting to interpretive and analytical frameworks that involve ideologies and viewpoints, thereby enabling the reading public to gain added perspective, expose different points of view, and evaluate all sides of an issue before arriving at their opinions. This is partly due to the growing complexity of news during the 1980s, which made the interpretation of current affairs increasingly important for readers. This phenomenon in media studies is commonly referred to as "the CNN effect" which encapsulates the idea that real-time news can provoke major responses from the international community (Robinson, 1999). Expanding on this, Krumholz and Calavita (2003) pointed out that the 1970s and the 1980s witnessed formidable growth of new foundations and think tanks, ready to do ideological battle in public debate over government, business, and the public interest. In support of this notion, McNair (2009) asserts that

we need the interpretative (value-laden) moment in journalism because the world is too complex and its information flows too rapidly for us to make sense of it. As a function, journalism provides news, interpretation, evaluation, and persuasion (Bovee, 1999).

Habermas (1989, 2006) describes the development of the mediated public sphere, where the media have become carriers and leaders of public opinion since the eighteenth century, from mere institutions for the publication of news stories. The most obvious example of such a function can be found in the opinion pages of newspapers, such as the op-ed (opposite to editorial) page (Coppock & Kirby, 2018). The creation of an op-ed section indicates newspapers' commitment to democracy (Golan, 2013). Recognizing that their view is not the only one and making room for other voices, newspapers began publishing op-eds. On the epistemological justification for op-eds (Belew & Mulatu, 2025; Mwaura, 2017), newspapers introduced these sections as public forums to allow a range of opinions and viewpoints on salient public issues to be expressed in the public sphere. This study examines how the reform process was presented in selected newspapers' op-ed sections.

### 3 MEDIA FRAMING

The concept of framing is considered one of the most prominent features in the field of mass media, suggesting that the way information is presented to an audience or reader influences their choices regarding how to process and structure the message (Goffman, 1974). Scholars have defined media framing in various ways. The most widely cited definition of media framing is that to frame is to select certain pieces of information and make them more salient (Entman, 1993), indicating how the media draws public attention to specific issues. Further refining the definition of frames, (Tankard, 1991) describes a frame as the central organizing idea of a communication text that provides a background for the content and suggests the main issues through selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration. In the media, framing begins with the choice of what to present and what to omit from the news.

Media frames were explored at length for the first time in Gitlin (1980) and Tuchman (1978) studies, which aimed to debunk journalistic objectivity, the bedrock principle of professional news gathering, as a myth. Through textual analysis and ethnographic fieldwork, the two studies found that objectivity masked the ways in which format conventions, news values, and cultural values shaped the patterns of selection, emphasis, and exclusion. Entman (1993) further defined media frames as aspects of a perceived reality that are made salient to receivers. In his definition, Entman (1993) offered a more detailed explanation of how media provide a central organizing idea to interpret events: "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation." In this context, 'salience' means 'making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to the audience,' suggesting that framing an issue or event in the text can affect how readers understand and interpret stories.

Framing is not only about selecting information; it also involves creating meanings. There are two main views on the role of media in this process: 'media as a mirror' and 'media as a constructor of reality' (Tuchman, 1978). The 'media as a mirror' perspective assumes that reality exists independently of media organizations, while the constructivist view is that media constructs reality rather than passively reflecting it. Aligning with the constructivist view, (Engle, 2013) argues that the media are not value-free; rather, they are shaped by views, biases, and partiality that influence how information is presented and interpreted. Unlike the mirror model, constructivists see media frames as portraying a perceived reality shaped by journalists' choices. This study adopts this approach to argue that communication content is dynamically constructed by journalists and media organizations. As media framing theory centers on selection by exclusion, it offers a valuable lens for examining the presentation of Ethiopia's 2018 reform process in newspaper op-ed sections, specifically through the selection of reform-themed op-ed articles and the presentation of diverse perspectives on the topic.

## 4 FRAME ANALYSIS

Media framing theory has two core processes: frame-setting (the interplay between media frames and audience predispositions) and frame-building (the construction of frames by journalists and media outlets) (Vreese, 2005). This study follows Vreese (2005) approach by focusing on frame-building and examining how media frames are constructed by media outlets through routine journalistic decisions. This emphasis allows for a nuanced analysis of how media selection and exclusion shape reform narratives in selected newspapers' op-ed pieces.

There are two main approaches to identifying frames in media content research: inductive (frames emerge from the text during analysis) and deductive (frames are predefined based on theory or prior research) (D'Angelo, 2017; Matthes & Kohring, 2008). In the inductive approach, frames emerge directly from the communication text during the analysis without preconceived categories, with an open view to revealing the array of possible frames (D'Angelo, 2017; Matthes, 2009). In the inductive approach, there is no definitive theoretical model to guide the observation of framing devices; frames emerge from media content during the analysis, allowing for an open exploration of a range of possible frames. Employing a textual content analysis approach informed by inductive framing analysis, this study examined reform-focused op-eds to locate the parts where the media and authors contextualized the reform issue.

Identifying media frames involves using a content-analytical technique to locate the parts of a mediated text in which an individual or group is deemed to contextualize a specific topic. By employing an inductive frame-building process, this study assessed how each op-ed was constructed and presented to the readers. This process involves three phases of analysis. First, framing devices were devised to deconstruct the coded op-eds and evaluate how each was constructed. As there are no pre-existing inductive frameworks applicable to frame identification, researchers have employed conventional textual analysis, focusing on textual meaning within its context. The second phase involved a close reading. In the third phase, the op-eds were categorized based on their framing.

Based on the theoretical framework, relevant literature, and analysis approach in the previous sections, two empirical questions were formulated to examine the dominant frames in the op-ed sections of newspapers.

1. What types of framing are widely used by the op-ed sections of the selected newspapers to present public discussion during Ethiopia's 2018 reform?
2. How do the frames differ across the selected media outlets in their coverage of reform?

## 5 MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data were collected over a year between April 2018 and March. The chosen timeframe was significant as it coincided with the country's 2018 national political reform and increased media freedom, allowing public expression on various issues. Researchers selected four national newspapers based on their inclusion of op-ed pages, their status as leading national publications, and their appeal to a general audience (Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority, 2019). Among these, Addis Admas and Addis Zemen are published in Amharic, while The Ethiopian Herald and The Reporter are English language publications. Notably, The Reporter was chosen for its higher number of op-ed columns than its Amharic counterpart, featuring six op-ed columns in each edition.

To select sample op-eds for analysis, the researchers used a constructed-week sampling technique, which helps approximate the content of a larger population in media studies (Cohen et al., 2011). Accordingly, we divided the sample year into four 3-month periods and constructed one week with seven days for each period, indicating that each sample newspaper had four constructed weeks or 28 editions in the study period. To collect data over seven days in each constructed week, we initially chose the first sample day randomly, followed by the selection of subsequent days at approximately 26-day intervals. This method yielded a sample of 159 op-ed pieces published on the 2018 political reform, with 58 from Addis Admas, 23 from Addis Zemen, 25 from the Ethiopian Herald, and 53 from The Reporter.

Employing a qualitative content analysis approach informed by inductive framing analysis (Chong &

Druckman, 2013), this study examines the frames used in op-ed articles covering Ethiopia's 2018 reform. Employing the inductive approach, the frames emerged during the analysis. To identify the dominant frames employed by the selected media's op-eds, we randomly selected a subset of 24 op-eds (n= 24), selecting six op-eds from each newspaper's website. The sample size (i.e., the number of op-ed articles) did not pose any problems for qualitative textual analysis.

In this study, frames exist as constructions based on the researcher's interpretation of the op-ed texts. Sample op-eds were coded manually according to a specific set of qualifying criteria, in which op-eds were categorized based on their framing devices (topics, themes, attributes of sources, and/or a combination of these devices). Specifically, each op-ed was coded for its framing device. During the coding process, framing devices were separated from frames, as they were the first items identified in each op-ed article. Following this identification, the framing devices were analyzed to determine the dominant frame employed in each article.

## 6 DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

### 6.1 Discussions

This study analyzes how Ethiopia's 2018 reform process was presented in selected media outlets, revealing patterns of framing that shaped public discourse during the reform period. Through textual analysis, we identify two dominant frames – responsibility and binary– which are employed in Ethiopian media op-ed columns when discussing the country's 2018 reform process. The responsibility frame, as defined by (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), attributes the causes of or solutions to the government, an individual, or a group, thereby shaping perceptions of accountability. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) further note that this frame is used most frequently in serious news stories. The responsibility frame identified in this study comprises two sub-frames – individual- and societal-level responsibility – suggesting that different perspectives on the same issue may be influenced by framing. In the context of framing analysis, the binary frame is the second most dominant frame, along with the responsibility frame. According to Watson (1998), binary frames present events or issues in opposition to their counterparts by selectively including and excluding key issues and actors, portraying them as having only two opposing sides, viewpoints, options, or categories. The binary frame is mainly featured in political op-ed articles. In this study, the identified binary frame depicts Ethiopia's 2018 reform as a dichotomy between pro-reform and anti-reform military forces. The results of the analysis also point to the application of different framing and reasoning devices to construct different sub-frames derived from the identified dominant frames.

Op-eds employing an individual-level responsibility frame attribute the reform efforts to an individual political actor: the newly elected Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed. This subframe appears to frame political reform as a personal endeavor driven by his leadership, thereby suggesting that the success or failure of political reform rests primarily on his actions. The selected media outlets employed this frame with different themes: some promoted the Prime Minister's reform actions, while others blamed his inaction. Different sources are quoted under the individual-level responsibility frame: This is evident in Addis Admas's op-ed "ኢትዮጵያ ገዢ ሳይሆን መሪ አግኝታለች" (Ethiopia has found a Leader, not a Ruler) and The Reporter's "The plight of internal refugees: Is it going to be the defining feature of our home-sprouted federalism?"

The analysis of framing devices in these op-eds reveals that variations in the individual-level responsibility frame reflect differences in the sources employed, as they play a crucial role in shaping frames and defining issues (Hall, 1980). This suggests that the media selection of sources directly influences issue framing. For instance, Addis Admas's op-eds rely heavily on the prime minister's public statements (speeches, press releases, interviews), which shape their pro-reform emphasis, while The Reporter's op-eds, although also using an individual-level responsibility frame, draw from opposition politicians and unaffiliated individuals, leading to a more critical tone. These source variations not only influence message presentation and interpretation but also signal alignment with specific political viewpoints, reinforcing Aarøe (2011) and Hänggeli (2012) assertion that political actors can introduce key frames into public discourse and echo Johnson-Cartee (2005) claim regarding source standardization, which occurs when media texts consistently rely on the same sources to reinforce a particular political reality.

Using a responsibility frame at the individual level may reinforce a top-down approach to reform, placing responsibility and accountability on individual leaders. This may reflect long-standing Ethiopian traditions and beliefs, aligning with [Iyengar \(1990\)](#) observation that dominant paradigms, ideologies, and worldviews shape attributions through political socialization and acculturation.

Some media outlets employ a societal-level responsibility frame, portraying the 2018 reform process as a collective duty shared among citizens rather than being solely driven by individuals, situating the reform within the broader socio-political context. By appealing to readers' sense of national pride, morality, and responsibility, the societal-level frame is notably used to mobilize public support for the reform initiated by the reformist government. The results from *The Ethiopian Herald* and *Addis Zemen* newspapers show that this frame is employed in their op-ed articles, portraying the need for unity among readers in the pursuit of democratic reform. This frame is identified in the op-eds from both *Addis Zemen* and *Ethiopian Herald*, titled “ሥርዓት አልበኝነትን በተበበረ የህዝብ ክንፍ” (End Anarchy with the United Arms of the People), and “Fighting for a Shared Goal,” respectively. The articles emphasized the importance of collective action and solidarity among citizens as essential for restoring peace and order. In examining the distribution of this framing between the articles in the two newspapers, one could argue that this is potentially achieved through the editorial choices of the media, as the editorial strategy in each media outlet involves the allocation of a similar frame to the articles.

Apart from the responsibility frame, the analysis also reveals the prevalence of the binary frame, which appears in two aspects: pro-reform and anti-reform binary frames. Op-eds with a pro-reform binary frame represent the reform process in a positive light, including revising repressive laws, dropping charges against outlawed political parties, and welcoming exiled pro-opposition media. This framing demonstrates the media's agenda-setting role, aligning with [D'Angelo \(2017\)](#) study on the agenda-setting power of opinion pieces for both the mass public and elites. Op-eds with this frame focus on a number of themes, such as “democracy,” “national unity,” and “justice” justice. For example, an op-ed in *Addis Zemen*, entitled “ከሞት አልባ ጦርነት ወደ መደመር” (From deathless war to integration), portrays post-2018 Ethiopia in a positive light in contrast to that of the previous regime. Similarly, the *Ethiopian Herald* uses a pro-reform frame in its op-ed article, entitled: “The Issue of Rule of Law Cannot Be Put to Debate,” published on August 30, 2018, to characterize a functioning legal system and due process in the reform period, situating it within the democratic potential the reform holds for the country and the reformist government's efforts to improve governance and rectify past injustices.

Another perspective in the binary frame, as observed in the op-ed column discussion, is the favorable presentation of the 2018 reforms in the news. This framing is utilized to highlight the constructive aspects of the reform, specifically focusing on its role in rectifying the institutional failures of the previous regime's policies. By aligning the reform with the themes of restorative justice and rational healing, this framing portrays the reform as a vital corrective process. For instance, an op-ed piece in *Addis Admas* titled “ሀገሩም፣ ህዝቡም፣ መሬቱም እርቅ ይፈልጋል” (The county, the people, and the land need reconciliation), employs this lens to show the perceived successes of the political opening in the region: By positioning the reform within a pro-reform binary angle, this perspective suggests the reform is a crucial path toward national unity, effectively bridging historical grievances to establish a more inclusive political order in the future.

The other newspaper analyzed in this study, *The Reporter*, employs an anti-reform angle in the binary frame to criticize the perceived lack of ethical leadership and rising populism accompanying the reform. This frame is identified in an op-ed article contributed by *Kibrome Berhane* on December 29, 2018, which critiques the emotionally driven nature of political discourse: The article adopts explicit oppositional stance toward the perceived reform, stating that:

Because our moral system is diminishing, our politicians are so quick to judge and too feeble to control their nerves (just like the mindless crowd) when talking about sensitive issues. Most political leaders care more about arousing the emotions of their crowd than about taming their people's irrational views against others.

According to this critique, the perceived reform is undermined by leadership that prioritizes emotional manipulation over governance. In the same edition, an op-ed by *Merhatsidik Mekonnen* titled “The evolution of a state within a state: is that not a mockery of contemporary politics?” was published. further critiques the reform as a catalyst for the erosion of central state authority in China. Collectively, this framing suggests that the reform has fostered a volatile political environment rather than a stable, principled democracy, thereby endangering the country's sovereignty and social cohesion. Such a consistent concentration of critical perspectives suggests deliberate editorial positioning rather than a

random collection of contributions. The recurring nature of these critical themes in The Reporter suggests a concerted editorial stance rather than a random collection of contributions to the journal. This pattern of representation reinforces Hallin and Mancini (2004) argument that media content reflects the institutional priorities of media houses.

## 6.2 Conclusions

This study establishes how different interpretations of the same issue are linked to media framing. The findings reveal that the selected media outlets present Ethiopia's 2018 reform through different narratives, reflecting the influence of different framing strategies on public opinion. Specifically, the state-owned Addis Zemen and Ethiopian Herald employed a societal-level frame, portraying the reform as a collective, national endeavor. In contrast, privately published Addis Admas and The Reporter utilized an individual-level responsibility frame to portray the reform as contingent on the actions and accountability of specific political actors. This suggests divergent interpretations rooted in their ownership structures and editorial policies. Building on this, the analysis also shows a clear divergence in overall stance: While Addis Admas, Addis Zemen, and The Ethiopian Herald uniformly present a pro-reform perspective, The Reporter provides a contrasting anti-reform narrative. These distinct framing patterns, combining both the locus of responsibility and the overall stance towards the reform, indicate a media landscape where ownership and political alignment strongly shape public discourse. By applying Entman's explanation of framing devices, the comparative analysis reveals how the selective use of these devices has led to a contested portrayal of the reform across selected media outlets, indicating the prevalence of differing facts and evaluations across them.

The study identifies a lack of diverse viewpoints in the media's reform discourse, as op-eds across selected media are limited to a narrow set of interpretations: the societal- and individual-level sub-frames within the responsibility frame, and the pro-reform and anti-reform sub-frames within the binary frame. This contradicts the op-ed page's designated purpose as a forum for diverse perspectives and open dialogue, reflecting Tumin (2017) suggestion that the op-ed page serves as a platform for exploration, interpretation, and presentation of diverse viewpoints on important public issues. This implies that the public sphere of media should hold a social responsibility to enhance the range of freedom of expression rather than expanding the influence of the media or privileged individuals. This study provides a valuable resource for interested researchers, academics, and media students on the issues of media studies, media democratization, and media theory, providing initial insights into how media may influence public discussion on Ethiopia's 2018 reform agenda. Equally important are the questions of how op-ed pieces about the reform are selected and how they present the reform in the media:

Despite the rigor of the analysis, this study has some limitations. First, because we focused exclusively on op-ed articles from four widely circulated Amharic and English newspapers in Ethiopia, we recognize that we may not have captured all relevant op-eds to reflect the dominant frames and framing devices of the 2018 reform. Additionally, our findings cannot be generalized to encompass the entire Ethiopian media landscape or op-ed articles published in languages other than English.

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The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest

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