Politics Gone Wired

Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis of Facebook Political Discussions in Ethiopia

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May, 2014
Acknowledgement

This goes out to all the people that contributed directly and indirectly for the completion of this research and my study in general.

My biggest gratitude goes to my supervisor Professor Michał Krzyżanowski whose dedication and knowledgeable guidance have helped in the realization of this study. It has been such an honor to work with a person of your expertise for which I feel very grateful.

The Swedish Institute deserves a big round of appreciation for sponsoring my studies and making the past two years the best experience and worth every sacrifice. Thank you for the continuing support to millions in fulfilling their dreams. I would also like to thank SPIDER for providing me with travel grant to conduct preliminary data gathering for this study.

I also wish to thank all the professors in the Department of Media and Communications whom I have benefited so much from with special thanks to the program director of Global Journalism, Walid Al Saqaf for being there always, clearing up confusions and providing guidance, for his all-rounded knowledge and dedication to seeing us through the two years. I must also give special thanks to Peter Berglez for taking time to review the study in its inception.

To all my classmates and friends in Örebro who have made Sweden home away from home; it has been great being around such a delightful bunch and thank you for making Swedish winter and exam stresses bearable.

And finally to my family, you are the best support system anyone could wish for. I cannot say it enough but thank you for always being there and supporting my dreams. I would specially like to thank my husband Emnet for inspiring me to be forward-looking and for always having my back and my baby girl Nael, the thought of whom puts a smile on my face and keeps me going every day.
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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed a revolution in communication that resulted from the constant development in ICT and hence widespread popularity of social media networks. Despite the low internet penetration rate in Ethiopia, this wave of social media particularly Facebook has become a popular trend among the country’s youth. However, studies are needed to examine the extent to which this network embodies a democratic forum for political deliberations.

In light of contemporary discussions about the internet-democracy relationship, the current study took the reconceptualized version of the deliberative model of democracy to analyze the sample comments. The study sought to examine Facebook’s democratic potential by analyzing the rationality, diversity and civility of its political discussions. It implemented a qualitative Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis based on the coding and counting of comments followed by a qualitative analysis of the results.

Regarding rationality of the discussions, the analysis revealed that though there were few cases with significant proportion of reasoning, on the majority of the threads reasoning remained low. In relation to diversity of participants on the political discussions, the two sets of samples yielded different results in which one had higher number of supporters whereas the opposite was displayed on the other. In general, anti-government sentiments characterized the threads analyzed in this study. A further analysis of the interactions between participants demonstrated that a significant majority of exchanges occurred between those from different ideological backgrounds. The examination of the comments for civility revealed that only one third of the comments were of uncivil nature.

Therefore, based on these findings, the study concluded that though reasoning was a small part of the discussions, those threads that exhibited a significant level of reasoning depicted Facebook’s potential as a locus for rational deliberation. The analysis of diversity on one of the threads confirmed the argument that despite the availability of a variety of information, users cluster in homogeneity instead of seeking out alternative views. However, as fragmentation’s contribution depends on its ability to challenge hegemony, in the context of this research, Facebook could be taken as having a potential for a democratic sphere in magnifying marginalized discourses. And finally, the low level of uncivil engagement exhibited in the samples chosen for this study portrays Facebook’s potential as a forum for civil political discourse.
1. Introduction

The advent of the internet in the last decade of the 20th century sparked hopes for a democratic Utopia in which citizens can equally participate in the creation of public opinion. This followed the new, speedy and interactive features the internet brought into the media scene. During their early years of existence, print and broadcast also enjoyed more or less similar optimism but it was only a matter of time before they became consumed by the vertical and unidirectional flow of information, and increasing commercialization that took power away from the masses. However, as high are the hopes on the internet for overcoming such factors, so are the skepticisms that perceive it as no different from preexisting media and as a new media that will only help establish status quo.

Different models of democracy have been proposed by different scholars to allow room for accommodating contemporaneous media technologies. All of these scholars take as their point of departure the bourgeois public sphere which promotes the deliberative model of democracy (dealt with extensively in the theory chapter and used as a conceptual framework for this study). The public sphere represents an autonomous space in which citizens enact political participation through discursive engagement in matters of public concern.

Since the function of the public sphere has been claimed to have declined due to state interference and commercial influences, contemporary discussions of the public sphere revolve around the potential of the internet enabling citizen participation and direct political communication by making political information available to the wider public. In this regard, as new forms of communicative spaces, social media networks are seen as expanding citizen participation by allowing anyone with access to express their views, hence a better embodiment of the public sphere.

Even as the growing importance of the internet becomes evident with over 2 billion daily internet users1, dystopian views continue to exist against those who overestimate the power of the internet in reviving the public sphere. Despite the bottom-up approach afforded and a multitude of information made available by the internet, opponents point out that it is not independent of its surrounding contexts. Therefore, considering these

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ambivalences, it becomes simplistic to think of the internet as the public sphere incarnate. Accordingly, there is a need for evidences showing the potential of the internet in specific contexts.

However, the vast information available on the internet is not a guarantee for its democratic function for not only political communication, but trivia and anti-democratic discourses also find their way into the World Wide Web. Therefore the mere fact that access to internet is growing does not confirm the debate about its potential for extending the public sphere. In this regard, scholars suggest that it is vital to examine the content of online discussions making an enquiry into the extent to which they constitute political discussions thereby measuring the rationality of claims and their adherence to topic.

In addition, amid the diversity of opinions available on the internet, scholars fear that people choose compliance over diversity and this contributes to the emergence of extremism. Those in opposition to this fear suggest that internet does not promote homogeneity but brings different dialogues into the political sphere. Although there is research that supports both claims, there is a need for more studies that provide answers to these questions in different contexts.

In comparison to the mass media, the internet undoubtedly provides a new platform for discussions on matters of public interest. It has also given power to citizens as it shifted the agenda-setting role of the media to the hands of ordinary citizens. But empirical evidences are needed to fully understand its utility in contemporary politics.

1.1. Background

The media landscape in Ethiopia has always been polarized as its function has been defined by those who control it. For as long as media existed in the history of the country, the state media served as “willing mouthpieces for the rulers”\(^2\). The current paradigm of development journalism also entails the promotion of government policies and shunning critical reporting regarding them. On the other hand, the ‘independent’ press which came into the picture following the Press Bill of the 1990’s briefly after the current government, EPRDF took power, have always been driven by commercial pressure

resulting from the low readership in the country coupled with the low advertising revenue. As a result, they resort to sensational reporting which constantly puts them in confrontation with the government that responds with intimidation and arrests of journalists.

It is then in this backdrop that Facebook recently emerged as a space for political discussions. Though it remains one of the world’s lowest, as internet penetration steadily increased so has the use of social media networks such as Facebook. Facebook has created a platform enabling citizens from around the world to come together to deliberate on national politics. Especially in the face of severe media laws, such as the 2009 Anti-Terrorism law that have been used to legitimize crackdowns on some journalists and bloggers, there have not yet been similar reports so far on Facebook. For a country like Ethiopia where the development of media and its freedom leave a lot to be desired, the internet can serve as an important alternative space for marginalized discourse and a forum for political deliberations. According to Research ICT Africa Policy Brief, 2012\(^3\), the expansion of mobile phones has enabled more people to get connected to the internet as 80% access it through their phones.

As the internet penetration is next to nothing in Ethiopia, the inclusion of this insignificant fraction of the public may render the internet a privilege of the few. Nevertheless, considering the very low newspaper readership figures in the country estimated to be 200-10,000 weekly\(^4\)which are much less significant than internet connectivity, the internet holds out a promising prospect for a viable public sphere.

According to Market Research Reports (2010) 94% of Ethiopia’s internet users are concentrated within the capital city, Addis Ababa. Considering the fact that the capital is the power house of the continent with all the most important diplomatic offices including

\(^3\) the main findings of the 2011/2012 ICT access and usage household and individual survey which reports that the emergence of Internet enabled mobile phones and lower bandwidth adaptations of applications, particularly social media, is driving the rapid diffusion of mobile internet.
http://www.researchictafrica.net/publications/Country_Specific_Policy_Briefs/Internet_going_mobile_-_Internet_access_and_usage_in_11_African_countries.pdf

the African Union and the Economic Commission for Africa, it can be assumed that the internet reaches the political elite who have the power to influence decisions.

Moreover, as the penetration is gradually growing, it may be time to start rethinking this notion especially considering recent successful campaigns on the internet that demonstrated its potential as a democratic sphere. In particular over the past year, Facebook has proved its potential in bringing the public for a coordinated action. However, when it comes to political deliberation, questions still remain to what extent it fulfills a democratic function.

Yet, the growth in the number of Facebook users in the face of highly a restrictive media environment is an important phenomenon. Therefore, the general objective of this research is to study the role Facebook plays in providing an alternative space for ordinary citizens in the Ethiopian situation. In light of the recent popularity of Facebook for political discussion, this study set out to identify the extent to which this social networking site is playing a democratic role in terms of promoting meaningful, diverse and civil political discourse.

1.2. **Statement of the problem**

Despite the low internet penetration rate in Ethiopia, the role of Facebook in contemporary politics continues to grow. Recent evidences show that public opinion created as a result of interactions on Facebook has made more impact than ever was possible in the context of the country. It has made possible discussions and expressions of opinion and dissent as well as support like never before. Facebook is changing political communication in Ethiopia; little is known as to what extent it embodies the qualities of a democratic discourse.

In light of this, the current study is an attempt to understand and explain this important phenomenon in terms of the discursive practices that surround political discussions. It tries to capture as much as possible elements of democratic discourse that are answerable in the context of this study. Accordingly, the study focuses on Facebook political discussions, specifically on comments that follow a particular post or status update. It makes a modest analysis of the rationality of comments, plurality of discourses and civility of the overall deliberation.
Therefore the study attempts to answer three questions the first of which is the analysis of rationality conducted through coding reasoned claims. This analysis process does not claim to validate arguments; it rather tries to assess whether comments have been supported with reasons so long as they adhere to the specific topic under discussion and involve interaction with other participants. This helps to measure the legitimacy of public opinion created as a result of public deliberation enabled through Facebook.

In an attempt to contextually understand the current discussion whether the internet contributes to fragmentation of the public sphere or creates a platform where plurality of discourses find their way, this study analyzes diversity of Facebook comments in terms of their political stands in relation to Ethiopian politics. The samples for analysis have been selected purposefully from opposite ends of the political spectrum to reflect the alignment of the public in relation to the polarized media system. The two active Facebook users whose ‘walls’ have been selected for this study demonstrate their political alignment through their everyday posts on Facebook.

The manner in which participants of the Facebook discussions express their opinions and accommodate differences will also be analyzed in terms of the extent to which discourses are carried out in a civil manner. In addition to the interactions of posters to participants an additional analysis of the inter-ideological reciprocity will demonstrate whether participants are able to deliberate in civility.

The study therefore has been designed around the following three research questions:

- To what extent does Facebook promote rational, critical political debate?
- Does Facebook promote plurality or fragmentation?
- How civil is Facebook political discussion?

1.3. Significance of the study

As the study of discourse in online political communication is a relatively novel field of study, it suffers from a lack of adequate research. Most of the currently available body of research that explains the emancipatory potential of the internet is conducted in the context of the west. Therefore, the current study is done in the context of Ethiopia, a country that has one of the world’s lowest internet penetrations. With its new focus on an Ethiopian political discourse, it will give a new perspective to the unbalanced research field, a trend that largely contributes to the flawed assumptions that exist about the
internet. Therefore this study with its findings will answer some of the questions regarding the internet-democracy relationship and draw more attention to this field of research.

1.4. Design of the study

The current study consists of five chapters including the current chapter, the introduction where I describe the purpose, significance, research objectives and research questions. In the next chapter, I briefly describe the bourgeois conception of the public sphere, existing criticisms against it and other theories meant to contextually analyze contemporary political communication. The chapter also discusses the potential of the internet as a transnational public sphere for its ability to tackle some of the challenges of globalization with illustrations from some studies done on diasporic communities. At the same time, it presents arguments that call for re-conceptualization of the public opinion in this regard. This chapter further conceptualizes the public sphere-democracy relationship by turning to the discussion of different models of democracy. It dedicates a relatively larger space to the discussion of the deliberative model of democracy which is used as the conceptual framework for this study especially the re-radicalized version.

The Material and Method chapter discusses the multiple advantages of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) in researching an online phenomenon and identifies Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis as the appropriate method for the purpose of this study. It explains the rationale for selecting such method, the sampling criteria and data analysis procedures as well as analytical categories used to measure Facebook political discussion. The description of the empirical materials explains the components of the comment threads that the study focused on. The empirical materials for this study comprised of twenty status updates that were posted within the duration of February 1-20, 2014, a time frame that was randomly selected to maintain practicality for it coincided with the data collection stage of the study. The Facebook ‘wall’s’ of two friends, AD and DB, have been selected as the most appropriate settings to conduct analysis of political discussions for the context of this study.

Then, the context chapter maps out the Ethiopian media scene by describing its development and its current stage to aid the understanding of the study and put findings

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5 A Facebook status is a feature that allows users to post and share a small amount of content on their profile, on their friends’ ‘wall’s and in Facebook news feeds. http://www.techopedia.com/definition/15442/facebook-status
in perspective. It does so by analyzing some studies conducted addressing some issues found to be relevant for this study, such as media freedom, government control and diasporic media. This is followed by some figures in relation to ICT usage in general and Facebook in particular.

The largest chapter of the study, the *analysis*, uses tables and excerpts from the comment threads showing the different stages of analysis. The analysis has been divided according to themes in order to capture the research questions. Finally, the heart of the study, the conclusion is where the nexus between all the chapters is achieved. It discusses the findings of the analysis by relating them to the theories and studies referred in the theory chapter. Finally based on the findings, it suggests some directions for future research in terms of methodology and scope.
2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Overview

Ever since the time of the bourgeois public sphere, communication scholars have been preoccupied with re-conceptualizing the public sphere to fit with latest media technologies. Though there continue to appear more criticisms and re-radicalizations, Habermas’s work remains to be the most influential one guiding almost every endeavor in this regard. Contemporary studies of the public sphere for the most part are concerned with the relationship between the internet and democracy. Though the internet and other surrounding technologies were welcomed with much enthusiasm for their many new features that revolutionized communication, empirical evidences show that it may be premature to think of their potentials in reviving the public sphere. Much of the argument fails to consider that they exist within more or less the same social, economic and political contexts that defined the functions of preexisting media. These technologies are without a doubt better equipped with fulfilling the requirements for a functioning public sphere but it remains to be seen whether they can live up to this expectation.

In this chapter, I review the bourgeois conception of the public sphere followed by some critics of it. I will continue by mapping out some of the contemporary arguments in defense and against the internet’s potential as a public sphere and discuss models of democracy that seem relevant for this purpose in framing the conceptual framework, such as the deliberative and the agonistic models and mention criticisms that exist in response to contemporary models of democracy.

2.2. The Bourgeois Public Sphere

A discussion of the public sphere hardly goes without the mention of German philosopher Jurgen Habermas’s seminal work, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*, a book that discusses the social conditions that created a number of private middle class men who came together to engage in critical discussion concerning matters of public interest. This collection of middle class men constituted the bourgeois public sphere which Habermas explains as the coming together of private individuals to deliberate on issues of public interest, a condition that came into being after the
disappearance of feudal institutions by the 18th century. These discussions took place in public meeting places such as coffee houses, salons (Habermas, 1989).

The bourgeois public sphere created a middle ground for civil societies and the state. In his book, Habermas laments the degeneration of deliberative conversation by the public as a result of the advent of commercial media and the “transformation of the Liberal Constitutional State into a social-welfare state” (1989: 222) which jeopardized the independence of the public sphere.

“In the latter half of the nineteenth century, industrialization, urbanization, the growth of literacy and the popular press, and not least the rise of the administrative and interventionist state all contributed in various ways to its decline” (Dahlgren, 1991: 4).

Habermas (1989) indicates that with the emergence of the welfare state, public opinion which resulted from critical deliberation turned into a product of agenda setting by the media. It transformed, in Barton’s words; “from a legitimate sphere of rational-critical debate and action among private persons to a sphere of nonpublic opinion generated mostly by the mass media” (Barton, 2005:179).

For Habermas the bourgeois public sphere was the epitome of public spheres for “the medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent” (Habermas, 1989:27). As Kellner explains it; “[f]or the first time in history, ordinary citizens could participate in political discussion and debate, organize, and struggle against unjust authority while militating for social change...” (2000: 268). In addition to its uniqueness, there were certain characteristics of this public sphere that Habermas idealized in his book, most of which he has been criticized for and contributes by and large to influence contemporary discussions about ideals of a public sphere.

According to Habermas, the salons and coffee houses as the loci of discussions operated based on discursive parity as “they preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether” (1989: 36). Participants abandoned economic or public status when they engaged discursively in the public sphere. In addition, the discussions concerned subjects that were previously the domain of the church and state authorities. Subjects such as literature and philosophy became within reach and lost “their aura of extraordinariness and by the profaning of their once sacramental character” (ibid.). This gave way for private persons to make sense of cultural products independent of
the church and authorities, think and engage in meaningful discussions within the public sphere.

Furthermore, the loss of grip of power by the church and state authorities meant not only the availability of cultural products but also the accessibility of the public sphere to a general public. However, the conditions for inclusion were based on literacy and ownership of property. Habermas explains that the subjects of discussion also became inclusive in terms of not only significance but also accessibility. Here, he admits that within these specific criteria, only a few could find their way to the public sphere because “[t]he masses were not only largely illiterate but also so pauperized that they could not even pay for literature” (Habermas 1989: 38).

As much as the salons and the coffee houses played a role in facilitating the bourgeois public sphere, so did the emergence of newsletters and journals in transporting information for discussions. In fact, the political functions of the media that emerged from the bourgeois public sphere were enhanced, in addition to the removal of the guidance of public authorities, by the rise of newspapers; as Bucher quoted in Habermas explains it, “from mere institutions for the publication of news, the papers became also carriers and leaders of public opinion, and instruments in the arsenal of party politics” (1989: 182). The next section will outline some critiques of Habermas’s conception of the bourgeois public sphere.

2.3. Some Critiques of the Bourgeois Public Sphere

Though the bourgeois conception of Habermas’s public sphere has been harshly criticized by different critics, it still remains a highly influential work. Kellner (2000) points out that Habermas’s work has been powerful to the extent that it had initiated and influenced historical and conceptual discussions the result of which had been “considerably better understanding of the many dimensions of the public sphere and democracy itself” (266). Fraser (1990) applauds Habermas’s concept of the public sphere as an important work without which any attempt at understanding contemporary democratic limitations and developing alternative models as a result, would not succeed.

However, in many ways than one, the bourgeois public sphere have been contested by different scholars who not only think that these ideals do not hold true in contemporary society but who also think that they were merely ideals and never existed (Fraser, 1990) (Schudson, 1997) (Carey, 1995). Fraser brings to the spotlight ‘dubious’ assumptions
underlying the bourgeois conception of public sphere based on the revisionist historiographic accounts. As do many critics, Fraser also points out to the exclusive nature of the bourgeois public sphere that was reserved for educated white men. Furthermore she questions the notion of participatory parity considering “informal impediments” that prevented many from taking part in discussions (1990: 63).

Another line of argument related to the intra-public environment is that his ‘idealization of the earlier bourgeois public sphere as a space of rational discussion and consensus’ according to Kellner (2000) is historically unfounded as the interplay of interests and power had as much role to play as ‘discussion and debate’ in politics which also puts in question the universality of his claim. Fraser claims that the way to decide ‘common concern’ traditionally is through contestation and debate and points out that through deliberation, “participants are transformed from a collection of self-seeking, private individuals into a public-spirited collectivity, capable of acting together in the common interest” (1992:72).

Habermas’s conception of the public sphere has been criticized for idealized public sphere in the absence of inclusiveness (Eley, 1992) which implies that “[a]ny consensus reached is accomplished through an evolving process of coercion and exclusion” (Roberts and Crossely, 2004: 11). Fraser (1992) also problematizes Habermas’s conception of a single public sphere by pointing out the benefits of having multiple spaces of contestation for both ‘stratified’ and ‘egalitarian multi-cultural’ societies. The multiplicity of public spheres becomes even more relevant especially considering the case of contemporary “large-scale, differentiated late modern societies, not least in the context of nation states permeated by globalization” (Dahlgren, 2005:148).

Habermas was not criticized so much for ignoring the exclusion of the working class and women from the public sphere as he was for assuming a normative standard of a public sphere based on this exclusion. In fact, Fraser argues that it is his failure to examine coexisting public spheres that contributed to his idealization of the bourgeois public sphere. He even equated the emergence of contemporaneous public spheres to “fragmentation and decline” (1992:66).

In this regard, Kellner contends:

“while it is salutary to construct models of a good society that could help to realize agreed upon democratic and egalitarian values, it is a mistake to overly idealize and universalize any specific public sphere as in Habermas's account” (2000:267).
In light of some of these criticisms, in the next section, I turn to some existing arguments about the public sphere in the age of the internet.

2.4. The Digital Public Sphere

The Public sphere is an important concept for understanding the potential role of media in society. Contemporary discussions regarding the public sphere are highly tied to the internet and its promise of reviving the declining democratic culture. However, questions of whether the internet will facilitate the public sphere and remedy the declining democratic environment cannot be easily answered given the complexity of today’s society, politics and technology as well as the diversity of political systems and cultures worldwide. In addition, research into new media for the most part suffers from adequate empirical evidence to support the hyperbolic enthusiasm expressed by some scholars. Though there are researches being conducted to alleviate this problem, most are being done in the context of the west which still makes it problematic to make universal claims about the internet. Therefore, as Dahlgren (2005) suggests, any assertions that we make about the democratic potential of the internet must be context dependent.

A multitude of discussions about the political role of the internet have been carried out by communication scholars for years. These discussions have been mostly characterized by ambivalences about the political role that internet plays especially in the age of social media networks which present multiple platforms for discussion. Those who optimize with the prospect of the internet’s potential of extending the public sphere argue that contrary to the mass media that produce their content centrally, most tools available on the internet encourage user participation to a large extent; emails, social media networks, wikis, blogs, bulletin boards derive their contents from users connected to the internet. As some argue, the emancipatory potential of the internet is far more realizable than the mass media in that it grants power to its users in terms of controlling their own discourse and spreading cultural products, among other things (Goldberg, 2011). “In its present incarnation, the Internet enables users to produce and distribute content almost as easily as they receive it” (Barton, 2005: 178).

For the most part, new media’s role has been heralded because of its ability to allow simultaneous participation without the need for physical presence of individuals and wide range of knowledge available on the net and the reduced cost of access and its ability to make organization of demonstrations easy. Street (2011) in his article about e-democracy outlines
some ways in which new media revolutionized political communication. These include the direct access of state to citizens, voter participation in election campaigns, enhanced political activism, and citizen journalism.

Moreover, in line with the empowerment rhetoric new media are celebrated for creating increased spaces that allow the “increase in political voices, new modes of political engagement, and definitions of what constitutes politics” (Dahlgren, 2006: 151). These spaces are no longer limited to politicians; the virtual space also gives voices to ordinary people because new media inherently “favor access, malleability, reproducibility and sharing” (Kidd, 2011:95). On the internet,

“action is facilitated from the bottom up not top down, empowerment is real, direct democracy is renewed. Digital media’s style of operation is the antithesis of what we have grown accustomed to. Governments don’t set the agenda, we do. New media are nothing less than a revolution” (Ibid. 99).

This celebratory remark implies that the internet has a potential in expanding a democratic culture hence reviving the public sphere.

Particularly discussing Wikis as democratic forums, Barton (2005) points out their resemblance to the Habermasian public sphere in that the status of contributors is ‘bracketed’ and as opposed to the mass media, the production process is transparent as users can have access to different versions of documents. He boldly defends his stand and in response to questions of legitimacy of Wiki documents, he writes:

“even The New York Times makes grievous mistakes from time to time, and it is troubling to fathom how many reports issuing from corporate-controlled mass media have been colored to protect private interests. ... ceding the problem of legitimation to corporate interests and so-called official sources does not solve the problem, so one might as well take a chance on one’s peers” (Barton, 2005:189).

For Barton, the fact that these forums are exposed to ‘constant scrutiny’ by the public makes them more trustworthy than those with commercial interests (ibid.). They provide comprehensive and convenient information on almost all topics and are used as quick references by those with internet access. Nevertheless as reasonable as it seems to trust in wikis as potential democratic forums, it still does not change the fact that they are still not accepted as legitimate sources of information for academic purposes.
2.4.1. A Transnational Public Sphere?

Another reason for praising virtual spaces has been their ability to respond to the demands of globalization in that they provide forums of contestation for geographically dispersed publics. In this regard, some evidences have shown that diasporic networked publics have found spaces on the internet to discuss about common issues (Appadurai, 1996) (Artan, 2006) (Tettey, 2004) (Naficy, 1993). Tsaliki in her empirical study of a Greek diasporic community explains that the internet serves as a place for identity formation of geographically dispersed communities;

“cyberspace is perceived and experienced as a place where people share a sense of belonging, forms of expression, meanings and emotions, language, memories and rules of conduct which are as genuine as their real-life counterparts” (Tsaliki: 2003: 176).

Similarly, Mandaville, in his study of the use of internet in the Muslim Diaspora in the West implies that there is hope for the extension of the public sphere in the virtual space. He notes: “[w]e need to understand these media as spaces of communication in which the identity, meaning and boundaries of diasporic community are continually constructed, debated and reimagined” (2003: 135). His celebration of the internet continues with his remarks about its potential for providing inclusion to “[m]uslims, who often find themselves to be a marginalized or extreme minority group in many Western communities” (Mandaville, 2003: 146).

The above evidences show that the internet continues to play a role in bridging the spatial gaps that separate publics with shared citizenships and in maintaining connections with the ‘home’. Nowadays, given the salience of transnational issues that link people in faraway places, Fraser (2007) argues that it is necessary to redefine the ‘who’ and ‘how’ of the public sphere if we are to think of a transnational public sphere and maintain the legitimacy of public opinion under such circumstances. Sparks also confirms that “[t]he development of a global economy, and of political institutions that operate at the supranational level, call for the creation of a global public sphere” (2001: 75). Apart from the underlying assumptions that constituted the bourgeois public sphere and other subsequent conceptions discussed in the earlier sections, Fraser problematizes the normative legitimacy and political efficacy of public opinion which classically existed within the Westphalian frame. She points out that the inadequacy of the Westphalian conception of the public sphere is more evident now due to transnational issues that dissolve borders because their “interlocutors do not constitute a demos or political citizenry” (2007: 6).
In a normative political theory of democracy, according to Fraser (2007), the public sphere is conceived as a discursive arena for the creation of public opinion the legitimacy of which is measured by its emergence from participatory parity of those who are affected. Fraser points out that the Westphalian frame took for granted, “shared citizenship in a bounded community” as a necessary condition for the creation of public opinion (ibid. 10). However, due to transnational issues that surpass boarders of sovereign nations, it is no longer acceptable to limit the ‘all-affected’ principle of the theory to shared citizenship. Fraser states,

“the all-affected principle holds that what turns a collection of people into fellow members of a public is not shared citizenship, but their co-imbrication in a common set of structures and/or institutions that affect their lives” (2007: 11).

On the other hand, the efficacy of public opinion is measured in terms of public opinion’s ability to become administrative power that will respond to the desires of the public which Fraser calls translation condition and capacity condition respectively.

Therefore, instead of trying to force democratic theory on social realities and therefore evaluate them, Fraser’s “critical-theoretical approach that seeks to locate normative standards and emancipatory political possibilities precisely within the historically unfolding constellation” would fare better in understanding existing realities within the current geopolitical contexts. However, according to Sparks (2001), albeit intrinsic features of the internet, such as transparency, interactivity, participation, abundance of information, only a few voices are projected through the global infrastructure. He acknowledges the potential of the internet in making room for a global public sphere when the time comes for it to provide equal opportunities for the world’s community. However, he admits that in their present existence virtual spaces are no more than just global media.

### 2.4.2. The Internet as an Alternative Public Sphere

As can be seen from the examples in the previous section, in addition to being able to afford transnational spaces for contestation, the internet creates alternative spaces for marginalized groups (Tsaliki, 2003; Mandaville, 2003). These groups resemble what Fraser terms as ‘subaltern counter publics’ which refers to “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses” (1990: 291). In the context of the mass media, this is not possible as they as content is centrally produced.
Yet, from a structural point of view, trends show that the internet is becoming consumed in the commercial culture that has been claimed to have contributed to the decline of the public sphere potential of the mass media. Carey (1995) explains that the internet being part of a capitalist era, is prone to the very same commercial factors that deprived of its predecessors their public sphere potential. Kidd also contends that the internet, “although founded on openness and information, was swiftly colonized by businesses seeking to make money resulting in the dot.com boom of the 1990s” (2011: 101). Many also agree that it is heading the same direction as traditional media (Patekis, 2000) (Schiller, 1999) (Lessing, 1999, 2001).

Commercialization in this sense, does not refer to ownership as in traditional media per se because inherently, “no one person or state ‘owns’ the internet and can decide what it will be ‘for’ [emphasis in the original]”(Kidd, 2011: 95). However, what makes this obvious trend different in this case is the fact that the commercialization occurs in a much subtler way through ‘gatekeepers’ that evaluate user trends online “as a means of filtering the masses of information that we are presented with, and making sense of it” (ibid.101) for advertising purposes. In this regard, virtual communities are oriented towards certain views and not others by “mega-community sites” that “offer free space to virtual communities but sell space to advertisers” Dahlberg (2001:617). In other words, “the system of electronic participation is in fact a system of surveillance, monitoring citizens rather than responding to them” (Street, 2011: 269).

In many ways than one, the Internet especially social media networks have proved to be new spaces for ordinary citizens to deliberate and directly participate in political processes that determine their livelihoods. Africa has been no exception in this regard in which diasporic communities have used the Internet as a tool to hold their governments accountable. (Tettey, 2009). In addition to the popular uprisings in 2010/2011 in the North part of the continent that helped to organize crowds for a political change, the Internet is also serving similar purposes in many other African countries.

### 2.5. The Internet as a Democratic Space

A growing interest exists among scholars to evaluate the role that online political discussion plays in the constitution of public spheres (Goldberg, 2011). Some researchers have argued that online political discussion facilitates the expansion of public spheres, a central concept in deliberative democracies (Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren 2005). Perhaps the most common
counter to this enthusiasm of cyber sphere is the digital divide which according to Kidd is
determined by “geography, technological literacy, language, wealth, education, age, and, not
least, politics” (2011:102). Apparently, “access to online information is not universal and
equal to all” (Papacharissi, 2002:15).

Here, one can argue that since global digital coverage is growing considering its estimated
40.7 % penetration in 2014 as compared to the 11.7% in 2004, we now are in a better
position to talk about the internet’s promise of reviving the public sphere than we were a
decade ago. However, as mentioned earlier, the internet poses other challenges to users. With
constantly evolving new features in online production, only a few people with skills get to
produce sophisticated contents which involve videos, audios, and graphics. In his study,
Mandaville reveals that amidst all the euphoria of the internet creating an ideal public sphere
of inclusion and deliberation, the virtual activities for the most part are the territories of “a
new generation of IT-savvy diasporic Muslims” (2003:147). In addition, copyrighted material
cannot be shared freely among users, which re-establishes the old hierarchies that exist
between the haves and have-nots. “These features will make it harder for Internet users to
freely share copyrighted or protected works and reduce the effectiveness of the Internet as a
platform for rational-critical debate” (Burton, 2005:178).

Since access is growing, can one then conclude that the internet is a better public sphere than
other media? If the internet is as Goldberg defines it “a site of social activity comprised of
rational discourse which occasions the informal constitution of the public will” (2010: 741)
then one must question whether all with access do take part in these discourses. According to
Papacharissi, the problem does not lie with the internet; more access does not mean more
political engagement because “[t]hose who do have access to the internet do not necessarily
pursue political discussion, and online discussions are frequently dominated by a few (2002:
15). This indicates that the internet has not made things any better than helping establish the
status quo. Dahlgren (2005) also notes that much of what is going on online is a reflection of
the reality offline. The elite domination of offline forums also extends itself to the cyberspace
as evidenced in different researches and experiments.

Furthermore, not only does virtual sphere reflect traditional politics with its structural
resemblance of harboring dominant-subordinate relationships existing offline, but also is a
space where anti-democratic ideals could also be found (Papacharissi, 2002) (Kidd, 2010)

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6 History and Growth of the Internet from 1995 till Today from Internet World Stats
http://www.internetworldstats.com/emarketing.htm
(Maia, 2007). Papacharissi cites an example of extremist groups who stand against the principles of democracy such as freedom of expression and “openly advocate discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity” (2010: 14). In addition, skeptics also cite the public’s preoccupation with non-political contents online as another reason to discredit the public sphere potential of the internet; as Kidd states,

“27.3 million tweets per day is not a sign of a healthy democracy but an obsession with the trivial. The 350 million people on Facebook are unlikely to rally for a common cause any time in the near future. 4 billion photos on Flickr represents participation of the lowest order. 1 billion YouTube views per day says more about an unhealthy obsession with dancing cats and watching X-factor re-runs than changing patterns in the organisation of people” (2010: 106).

Apparently, beyond the question of what the virtual space is capable of doing such as creating access, empowerment, culture exchange, and increased spaces for deliberation, there exists the question of what power users have and what they are willing to do with it. (Street, 2011) Here, Papacharissi makes a distinction between a public space and a public sphere and points out that “as public space, the internet provides yet another forum for political deliberation. As public sphere, the internet could facilitate discussion that promotes a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions” (2002: 11).

Maia also emphasizes the importance of this distinction and refers to the public space as “sphere of visibility”. She explains that the media’s role is “producing visibility and making expressions, discourses, images, and events publicly available” (2007: 84). Notwithstanding this distinction however, utopian views “take for granted that the mode of communication or technological mediation itself is constitutive of new possibilities” despite the fact that technological potentials are determined by different social contexts surrounding them (Bohman, 2004: 131). Thus in the context of the above problems that inhibit democratic activities on the internet, it becomes problematic to demand a technical fix.

This requires moving away from the technological determinism rhetoric that seems to underpin most utopian views of the internet’s public sphere potential. Sabadello cautions us against overestimating the potentials of technology when using terms such as “Facebook revolution” and “Twitter Revolution” because “[a]fter all, revolutions are not started and executed by technologies, but rather by people, by their burning desires and their fearless ingenuity” (2011: 1). In light of this, Papacharissi suggests that “[t]he content, diversity, and impact of political discussion need to be considered carefully before we conclude whether
online discourse enhances democracy” (2002: 18). In the wake of the multitude of data available online, Burton also points out that “it is worth asking who has what access to what sources of information, as well as asking what power they may have to act on that information” (2005:209).

2.6. The Fragmentation Debate

Despite the bottom up approach by the internet which is usually favored in a democracy, some argue that the very features that allow diversity also contribute to the differentiation of the public sphere in terms of topics, forms and platforms. Due to the various platforms available, range of topics being discussed and the diversity of participants, the internet for the most part operates on a personal level of the users which according to Rasmussen has contributed to the differentiation of the public sphere. “The current public sphere are more niche-oriented, both because of a more diverse media-scape, and because of a more ethnically and culturally pluralistic society in general” (2008: 77). In this regard, Dahlgren (2005) argues that it is the fact that the internet operates on a personal level that makes participation more meaningful for the masses.

Consequently, in terms of expanding spaces for communication, the internet is seen as having a double-faced potential. As the internet places power in the hands of ordinary citizens, the role of its users is transformed from passive consumers to active producers and participants. This power enables users to choose the kind of information they want to consume and trends show that these choices usually conform to their line of thinking and do not promote diversity of thought (Dahlberg, 2007). This ‘filtering’ process is further facilitated by different features on the internet such as bookmarks and automated ‘gatekeepers’ as mentioned earlier, that narrow the chances of users’ exposure to different ideas and opinions. In this regard, critiques point out that the internet provides reinforcement instead of ‘problematization’ or ‘contestation’ (Dahlberg, 2007b:828). Empirical evidences from studies of online political groups also confirm the internet’s tendency to promote homogeneity (Hill & Huges, 1998).

On the other hand, counter arguments also exist pointing to empirical evidences showing that “the internet is being used by many people to encounter difference that they would not normally encounter in everyday life” (Dahlberg, 2007b: 830). And since conversation is at the heart of these discussions about the public sphere, one could consider fragmentation as a positive thing in light of Schudson’s (1998) explanation of conversation. He explains that people engage in “homogeneous conversations” where they discuss with people of similar
views that are supposed to enhance their already established thoughts. He writes that these conversations with like-minded others with whom they “agree on fundamentals,” prepare them for venturing out into heterogeneous conversations with others who hold different views (Schudson, 1998: 302). This becomes more relevant considering the internet’s ability to provide multiple spaces which may be one reason not to discard fragmentation as of yet.

Regarding the fragmentation debate, while one group hails the internet for its plurality and diversity, the other denounces its potential for promoting homogeneity leading to extreme viewpoints. Apparently those on either side of the fragmentation debate are both advocates of the deliberative model of the public sphere “where difference is ultimately a problem to be dealt with, a threat to the formation of public opinion and social stability” (Dahlberg, 2007b: 832). Dahlberg points out four flawed assumptions in the fragmentation debate. Since this discussion overlaps with the discussion about models of democracy, I will include Dahlberg’s explanation of these assumptions and his subsequent (re)radicalization of the public sphere in section 5 after a brief discussion online behavior.

### 2.7. Social Media and Democracy

As Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) explain, “Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.” Embedded in this definition is a special feature that makes social media different from old Internet tools such as emails and search engines whose contents are produced by individuals as opposed to the social media networks in which content is created through the collaboration of all users, a concept that enhances participation. In fact, it is this very nature that gave them the label ‘social.’

The impact of social media in facilitating participation like never before has been witnessed in the popular uprisings in North Africa dubbed as the ‘Arab Spring’. Social media networks helped organize and bring a large crowd of people for a coordinated action that threw presidents out of office in 2010/2011. In a situation report for the Institute for Security Studies Chatora states, “If events in Tunisia and Egypt are anything to go by, it is reasonable to be cautiously optimistic about the potential of social media to encourage political participation and active citizenship” (2012: 1). Though the internet penetration rate in Africa is still low, there is an increasing use of social media especially through mobile technology. In this
regard, the social networking site Facebook tops with more than 30.5 million registered users as of June 2011\(^7\).

Chatora points out that “political participation can be understood as referring to the various mechanisms through which the public express their political views and so exercise their influence on the political process” (2012: 3). In this regard, social media networks have been hailed for the most part because of their ability to grant direct participation in political processes. Sabadello (2011) criticizes the celebration of the use of the new media in the ‘Arab Spring’ as something new, pointing out to the Columbian protest against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia in 2008 made possible through Facebook and

> “What is different today is that new media have played a more prominent role than before, that they have been used in more effective and determinate ways, and that the movements’ protagonists were able to draw from previous as well as from each other’s experiences.”

Amidst the pessimism of the Internet fragmenting its users into like-minded groups, Tettey’s study of the use of the internet by Africans in the diaspora shows that the internet has created a stage for contestations in which “the state’s hold on its translocated citizens has been ruptured, if not completely eliminated” (2009:147). This vantage enjoyed by diasporic communities translates into the power to question the state better than their compatriots in the ‘home’.

> “They are, consequently, better able to authenticate or debunk various narratives that may be put out by state actors in their countries of origin. These are then posted to support or challenge those dominant discourses. Discussion forums and chat-rooms, thus, provide a plethora of deliberative politics, as burning issues are brought up, opinions expressed, and analyses provide” (ibid. 148).

Nowadays, publics residing within the territory of the state are also enjoying same privileges thanks to social media networks, though the extent to which they are effective needs to be evaluated especially considering the fact that the majority of the country’s internet users are concentrated in the major cities in Africa.

\(^7\) Facebook users in the world: Facebook usage and Facebook penetration statistics [http://www.internetworldstats.com/facebook.htm](http://www.internetworldstats.com/facebook.htm)
2.8. **Social Media in context: A review of related studies in Africa**

Though there is a scarcity of studies about the use of social media in relation to Africa, there are a few studies conducted on the countries with relatively higher connectivity such as Kenya and South Africa. The use of social networking sites for political purposes as well as social activities has attracted the focus of communication research in the continent. In this regard, Makinen and Kuira for example conducted a study on the use of social media as an alternative medium for ordinary citizens in crisis situations such as in the aftermath of the crisis following the 2007 presidential elections in Kenya. The study revealed the complementary role of social media to traditional media and that social media has an important implication to the process of democratization in the country with the inclusion of diversity of voices into the media sphere in important political events. In a similar manner, this study also stresses the need to expand internet tools for reaching a wider population.

In a similar study on the post election violence of 2007 and the elections in 2013 in Kenya, Odinga (2013) revealed that the use of social media as an alternative media through citizen journalism promoting dialogue has increased political participation in the periods examined. Relatively free of control, social media helped to diversify and make other discourses available to a wider public by limiting gate-keeping and opening up a platform for ordinary citizens to deliberate. However, the study also questions the democratizing potential of social media given its use in spreading hate-speech and only a small fraction of Kenyans used the internet during the elections.

Moving away from the cosmopolis, Wyche, Schoenebeck, and Forte (2013) conducted a study on online participation in rural Kenya based on a qualitative field work of observation and interviews in internet cafés. Their findings reveal that several factors, which are usually taken for granted in the developed world affect people’s usage experiences. Though Kenya is one of the top countries with highest internet penetration in Africa, they explain that continuous power outages, limited bandwidth and limited financial capacity to pay for usage are some of the main factors affecting Facebook usage in these areas. The study was conducted with the purpose of giving remedial suggestions to overcome these challenges and increase the reach and efficiency of new media technologies.

Due to the low penetration rate of internet in Ethiopia, the number of studies in the context of the country is also very limited. Abiye (2010) made a research on the democratizing role of Ethiopia’s participatory online media, from many-to-many communication tools such as social networking sites, paltalk forums and collaborative news sites to blogs. His findings
revealed that despite the government’s efforts to filter and block these sites to prevent political dissent, the participatory media are persistent in terms of opening up new platforms for participation in an authoritarian state. In another large scale study that included other four countries with authoritarian regimes, such as Egypt, Tunisia, Eritrea, and Uganda, Abiy ( ) found out that the online media in these countries are mostly the domain of the educated elites who play vital roles in their respective countries’ politics. In addition, the study also revealed that the ways in which the internet is used is determined by the early adopters of the technology and that in countries like Ethiopia it assumes a more subversive nature. Moreover, the study uncovered that the replication of something like the ‘Arab Spring’ in other African countries in the near future is improbable due to the limited access to the internet and their relatively more restricted political situation. When it comes to the relationship between these participatory media and traditional media, the study also revealed that the former play a role in influencing mainstream discourse by setting the agenda directly or indirectly.

2.7. Conceptualizing Democracy on the Internet: A Conceptual Framework

Different models of democracy have been proposed for framing the relationship of democracy with the public sphere. After Habermas took one of the first initiatives in this endeavor, many have followed in criticism of his deliberative model, some by proposing a total abandonment of his work (Dean, 1996; Mouffe, 1999; Poster, 1997) and others by trying to amend some of its flawed assumptions. In this regard, Dahlberg (2007b) comprehensively maps out four assumptions underlying the deliberative model.

2.7.1. Deliberative Model of Democracy

Dahlberg (2001) explored the prospects of the deliberative model in extending the public sphere. Here, in an examination of three models of democracy relevant for contemporary arguments assessing the internet-democracy relationship, he emphasizes the proximity of the deliberative model towards expanding the public sphere in that it conceptualizes public opinion as a result of critical discourse. In contrast to the communitarian, which is oriented towards public-spiritedness and the liberal individualist towards “expression of individual interests”, the deliberative model sees the internet as a locus of “rational-critical citizen
discourse-discourse autonomous from state and corporate power through which public opinion may be formed that can hold official decision makers accountable” (p. 616).

The first two models are discredited on the basis of the “corrupting influences” (Goldberg, 2010: 743) that underpin discussions online. Within the communitarian model, online communities are oriented by commercial interests of “mega-community sites” (Dahlberg, 2001: 617) whereas the liberal individualist model undermines the individual’s capacity to seek out information and form their own opinion, instead consider them as, “a political subject who only needs to be given the appropriate information in order to make the right choices” (620). In both cases, “[t]he citizen ceases to exist as a self-conscious actor, and as such is incapable of deliberative political participation” (Street, 2011: 278). On the contrary, in the deliberative model participants relatively enjoy their autonomy as they are free from the influences of economy and state.

The deliberative model originating from bourgeois public sphere conception is also supported by Bohman (2004) among others. According to him, for a public sphere to be democratic, it has to provide a forum for exchange of ideas for participants who deliberate with mutual respect to each other. Such public sphere is not just about exchange but also involves the interplay of ideas in which,

“speakers offer reasons to each other and expect that others will consider their reasons or concerns at least to the extent that their speech acts contribute to shaping the ongoing course of the interaction, without anyone exerting control over it or having special status” (Bohman, 2004: 133).

Dahlberg (2001) formulated a set of criteria for assessing the online discussions as means of extending the public sphere. These include: Exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims, Reflexivity, Ideal role taking, sincerity, Discursive inclusion and equality, Autonomy from state and economic power. However, he reveals that these ideals are not that common in online discussions and suggests some ways online discussion could be geared towards a better outcome.

2.7.2. The Deliberative Public Sphere Re-conceptualized

Partly in response to the fragmentation debate, and partly in an effort to develop it further, Dahlberg re-radicalizes the deliberative conception of the public sphere. Dahlberg (2007) first points to the fact that this model in the fragmentation debate only focuses on the power of
difference and rational argument and that it ignores the effect of social, cultural and economic powers in determining the course of discourses. Fraser in her critique of Habermas’s public sphere draws attention to some of the ways in which these powers are manifested through language and societal practices. Though she cites examples from feminist researches, she notes that they can also apply to other societal contexts indicating that “deliberation can serve as a mask for domination” (1990: 64). Second, Dahlberg criticizes this debate for assuming a subject that can independently make decisions about the terms of deliberation disregarding “inter-subjective basis of meaning and rationality” (2007b: 833). In other words, it assumes that

“this subject can engage in reasoning that moves deliberation towards rational consensus through distinguishing between better and worse arguments, good and bad reasons, true and untrue claims, persuasion and coercion” (ibid.).

The third critic emanates from the very conception of democracy in the deliberative model; the fact that it considers difference as a form of societal disruption. Dahlberg argues that the model fails to acknowledge “respect for difference as a fundamental end of democracy” (Dahlberg, 2007b: 833). He mentions that though there exist some exceptional differences that do not deserve respect, it is an indication that “the maximizing of space for the effective articulation and practice of cultural diversity – is at the very heart of democracy” (ibid.). And finally, in the face of some historical democratic achievements, the model discards the role of ‘like-minded’ publics in bringing about societal changes (Dahlberg, 2007b: 833).

At the backdrop of these assumptions, the re-radicalized version of the public sphere that Dahlberg proposed provides a realistic theoretical framework for understanding the internet-public sphere relationship in that it presents a conception of the public sphere where discursive contestation is seen as means of challenging discursive domination and for confronting consensus and hegemony hence, expanding safe spaces for marginalized voices (2007b: 837). In this regard, consensus is not the end but just one component emerging out of the process of contestation. Thus, in light of this conception of the public sphere, “fragmentation into ‘like-minded’ groups that contribute to a plurality of counter-discourse can now be conceived as beneficial for democracy” (ibid). In other words, fragmentation contributes to democracy only if “the plurality of identities leads to effective contestation of dominance” and becomes a threat to it “when not accompanied by the articulation of (marginalized) identities” (ibid.).
The agonistic public sphere conception on the other hand is based on radical democracy theory and understands the internet as a locus of “political struggle and conflict: a contested terrain where exclusion and domination as well as solidarity and resistance are reproduced” (Dahlberg, 2007a: 56). Accordingly, the internet is seen as extending dominant discourses online at the same time giving spaces to marginalized ones as well to “develop their own deliberative forums, link up and subsequently contest dominant meanings and practices” (ibid.). In terms of serving as a discursive arena for marginalized discourses, the internet here has three fold advantages. Not only does it provide alternative spaces for marginalized publics but it also brings politically and geographically scattered publics into a common space as well as help them contest dominant discourses hence confront mainstream public sphere.

The difference between the two conceptions lies in their focus; the deliberative model focuses more on the rational deliberation on the internet whereas the agonistic model focuses on the ways in which the internet can serve as a locus of discursive contestation and as a space for counter-publics (Dahlberg, 2007a). In other words the agonistic model focuses on space while the deliberative on the discourses within. What both these models have in common is that they regard the public sphere as constituted by people who are discursively active.

However, Adut criticizes both models and others as “characterized by idealism and normativism” (2012: 238). He particularly criticizes them for their normative standards regarding the condition of civicsness or civility, the conflation of the public sphere with citizenship and the ideal of widespread, egalitarian participation (239). He points out that the criteria set for civility is unrealistic because people do not always have common good in mind when they engage in public affairs. He elaborates;

“What if we say that the public sphere emerges whenever people engage in civil debate regardless of their intentions? But then we are left with very little: it is hard to find engrossing and consequential public events or communications that do not feature disruptiveness, ad hominem attacks, or malice” (Adut, 2012: 240).

He also criticizes the fact that the public sphere is taken to be the locus of citizenship where as it can also include non-political discourses. Moreover, he denounces the conception of the public as merely active citizens engaged in public spaces considering the fact that only a few are politically and socially active.

“Participation in public affairs is sheer drudgery for many; others often steer toward such activity only because of disappointments in
These arguments hold true especially in the context of social media networks that are used by people for multiple purposes. Users go to these sites to socialize, meet new people and reconnect with old friends; for companionship for entertainment, to seek out information, for career purposes and for political discussions, among others. Empirical evidences so far show that online political activities are minimal and the internet is being used commonly for social activities such as chatting. As noted, one should also consider the democratic divide (Kidd, 2011); that just because people have access to the internet, does not mean they use it only for political purposes.

2.8. Online Behavior

Even though accessed by a small fraction of the world’s population, the cyberspace is nowadays serving as an arena for political discourse. Many agree that democratic discourse is characterized by civil discussions (Papacharissi, 2004; Herbst, 2010) guided by “courtesy, respectability, self-control, regard for others” (Kennedy, 1998:88). Incivility on the other hand is reflected by Flaming defined by Alonzo and Aiken as “hostile intentions characterized by words of profanity, obscenity, and insults that inflict harm to a person or an organization resulting from uninhibited behavior” (2004: 205). As the central tenet of the public sphere the way political discourses are carried out becomes very important in understanding the democratic potential of a medium. As Papacharissi explains it,

“conversations on the meaning of citizenship, democracy, and public discourse highlight civility as a virtue, the lack of which carries detrimental implications for a democratic society” (2004: 260).

Empirical studies show that the internet is intrinsically prone to uncivil behaviors among participants. In the face of a growing body of literature showing the potential of cyberspace for democratic discourse, there are also many empirical studies showing evidences otherwise. Online features that grant anonymity for participants allowing them to freely express their opinions also promote uncivil behaviors (Barber et al. 1997; Davis, 1999) as it is usually not possible to hold people accountable for their opinions online. Papacharissi (2004: 267) states, “[a]nonymity online obliterates real-life identity boundaries and enhances free and open communication, thus promoting a more enlightened exchange of ideas.” (Papacharissi, 2004: 267) whereas others argue that anonymity in online political discussion renders it
unproductive. Mishne and Glance (2006) Cyber skeptics argue that in online discussions, participants readily avoid differences and act uncivil when they are confronted with them.

Regarding these arguments about online behavior, Papacharissi makes a distinction between politeness and civility, two terms that are often used interchangeably. She argues that reduction of civility into mere politeness “ignores the democratic merit of robust and heated discussion” (2004: 260). Here, it is important to recall Fraser’s (1990) criticism of the bourgeois public sphere in which she identified the presence of some etiquettes that were subtle but prevented some from participating equally in the public sphere. Thus, Papacharissi in her study of political newsgroups draws a distinction between the two terms; she identifies that politeness

“frequently restricts conversation, by making it reserved, tepid, less spontaneous whereas civility merely ensures that the conversation is guided by democratic principles, not just proper manners” (2004: 260).

In other words, whereas politeness restricts democratic discourse, civility promotes it.

2.9. Summary

As Dahlgren (2006) argues, in open systems with access and political will, the internet indeed provides spaces for various kinds of interaction but that still does not guarantee a fertile ground for democracy or a prospect of a public sphere. Papacharissi also states; “while the internet has the potential to extend the public sphere, at least in terms of the information that is available to citizens, not all of us are able or willing to take on the challenge” (2002:15).

So, even if access to the internet grows, it is no guarantee to the revival of the public.

The much pronounced enthusiasm surrounding the phenomenon of the last decade of the 20th century may be just a wishful thinking considering the fact that even after two decades, the mass media continue to be the most important arena for formal politics. It should be a reality check that messages on the internet will have impact mostly when they find their way into the mass media. In this regard, if we consider the workings of the mass media, since they set the agenda, online discussions will be aired only if found to go in line with the dominant discourse. This could be an indication that it may be premature to think of a cyber public sphere.

In addition, the internet is feared to contribute the fragmentation of the public into like-minded groups instead of plurality in bringing diversity of discourse. This has divided media
scholars in different camps of those who totally discard fragmentation as a phenomenon that leads to extremism and those who denounce this claim but advocate the power of the internet in making multiple discourses visible. Yet others take fragmentation as a positive feature and consider fragmentation beneficial as long as it is being used to challenge dominant discourses.

Moreover, Scholarship in this area suffers from the lack of adequate empirical research to provide contextual understanding of the condition of the public sphere in the age of the internet. Therefore, a study of whether the internet extends the public sphere would fare better with lower expectations taking the existing political inactivity and cynicism into consideration.
3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

This study aimed at finding how social networking sites, specifically Facebook, are changing political discussion in Ethiopia. It made an inquiry into the discursive practices in what seems to be the most popular social networking site in the country nowadays. It set out to examine in what way Facebook is contributing to the creation of something that resembles a public sphere. Therefore, it did so by examining the extent Facebook discussions reflect democratic practices, if at all they do.

A qualitative methodology of Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis accompanied by quantitative as well as qualitative analysis was selected for this study; an in-depth study that could remedy the lack of adequate research on Facebook especially in the Ethiopian context. This method as used in this study utilized the method of quantification of comments on Facebook only as a tool for supporting the answers to the research questions; the study heavily relies on its qualitative analysis. Thus, the study went beyond the question of whether Facebook could be a site for political discourse; it also made an inquiry into the actual discursive practices. In addition, the fact that the internet penetration rate in Ethiopia remains one of the lowest in the world made it difficult to use quantitative methods such as surveys. Therefore, though they could not be generalized, the research questions set out at the beginning of this study will be adequately answered using this rich method of discourse analysis with supporting evidences, “based on analysis of actual records of online interaction” Herring (2004: 369).

The chapter is organized first to give a description of the empirical materials, the comment threads from the sample Facebook pages selected for this study. It does so by tabulating the two samples separately to show the topics of each post, number of likes⁸, comments and shares on each. Following this, the methods section discusses Computer Mediated Communication, its benefit as a site for data gathering and analysis, Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), the data analysis procedure and the analytical categories used for coding comments from the Facebook discussions.

3.1. Description of Empirical materials

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⁸ Likes are a way of showing preference or enjoyment of a post. More on: https://www.facebook.com/help/like
This study consists of the analysis of political discussions on Facebook with a particular focus on the discursive interactions between users. For this purpose, two ‘friends’, AD and DB, whose status updates frequent political contents and enjoy large numbers of participants have been selected. The sampling criteria for selecting these two ‘friends’ are described in detail in the next section.

Facebook discussions consist of original posts that appear on the profile of a Facebook user and are public to other users on the ‘friends’ list who then engage in interactions by ‘liking’, commenting on them. Some also share the status updates to allow other ‘friends’ on their list of ‘friends’ to see the particular content. Interactions are facilitated using the tagging function on Facebook to invite other ‘friends’ participate in the discussion. Participants also use @ before the names of other participants to specify to whom the comments are addressed to. Thus, this study took into consideration during the process of analysis. For example, with the help of tagging and @, it was possible to identify reciprocity between participants. Below are two tables outlining topics of the 20 posts used in this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic of Posts</th>
<th>Date of post</th>
<th>likes</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Shares</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corruption in a local cement factory</td>
<td>February 1</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Threat from the Eritrean Government” to AD</td>
<td>February 4</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former mayor of Addis Ababa</td>
<td>February 10</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties (TPLF Vs ARENA)</td>
<td>February 11</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic identities in Ethiopia</td>
<td>February 12</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“TPLF’s original intention”</td>
<td>February 13</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD’s reflection of his label “immature politician”</td>
<td>February 14</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnocentrism</td>
<td>February 16</td>
<td>502</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudanese president’s visit to Mekelle</td>
<td>February 20</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom of Citizens</td>
<td>February 20b</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 List of AD’s Posts
Table 3.2 List of DB's Posts

Table 3.1 and 3.2 show ten posts that were posted on each of AD and DB’s ‘wall' respectively during 1-20 February; their date of post, the number of ‘likes’, comments, and shares. These figures are not necessarily exact as some more ‘likes’, comments and shares may have been added after the period of data collection. These figures only show the interactions within the first two weeks after February 20. This was an attempt not to disrupt interactions as described in the methods chapter.

The posts were selected based on the number of ‘likes’ and comments which means that the posts have the highest of these components of all those that were posted within this time frame. Content wise, the two ‘wall’s were selected because of their very consistent political nature since this study has political discourse as its focus. However, since the focus of this study was on the actual discussions that follow these posts, except for occasional brief descriptions of the content of the posts, the analysis was done mainly on the comment threads.

Some posts appeared on the same day, in which case they have been identified by adding ‘b’. For example on AD’s ‘wall’, two posts from February 20 and on DB’s ‘wall’ from February 11 have been taken as samples in which case the second of the two appears with a ‘b’. The posts range from just a couple of short sentences to two A4 sized pages long status updates.

9 See what a Facebook ‘wall’ means: [http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/F/Facebook_wall.html](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/F/Facebook_wall.html)
In addition to posting status updates, posters also appeared on the comment threads asking participants questions or responding to questions from them. Comments from posters were counted when analyzing level of rationality but not that of diversity as the inclinations of the posters are already known from the start. They were not considered also in the analysis of reciprocity because this stage only took those comments that involved interaction between participants.

3.2. Computer Mediated Communication

Computer Mediated Communication (hereinafter CMC) has become an integral part of everyday life that humans cannot do without. Thus, its prevalence in different aspects of life has influenced an array of research making inquiries into the lives of modern day societies; in comparison to other media technologies and how they are shaping communications. Herring summarizes the kinds of questions that are more often being asked about CMC as follows;

“How has CMC technology changed, conceptually and feature-wise, from previous technologies? More importantly, is new CMC technology giving rise to new social practices, and if so, in what directions is it steering us?” (2004b:26).

According to Walther (2011), it is not so much the widespread popularity of CMC that attracts the attention of researchers as it is the way in which it shapes social interactions. As more people become connected to the internet engaging in interactions, the popularity of research in the area has also grown. The ease of data collection, storage and analysis made easy by these technologies has contributed to the popularity of CMC studies (Gruber, 2008). In this regard, Herring elaborates that research on online activities:

“...is facilitated by the fact that people engage in socially meaningful activities online in a way that typically leaves textual trace, making the interactions more accessible to scrutiny and reflection than is the case in ephemeral spoken communication, and enabling researchers to employ empirical, micro-level methods to shed light on macro-level phenomena” (2004: 338).

This means, studying communicative practices in CMC aided by readily available meaningful data can give important insights into modern society who are connected via computer networks from across the globe. However, the speedy, many-to-many communication whose audiences are usually unknown makes computer mediated discourse to be experienced in a much different way than written text and spoken language (Herring, 2001) making it
necessary to device a special methodological design that can examine the peculiarities of CMC as an arena for political communication.

3.3. Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis

This call for a new approach to web content analysis is based on the assumption that any study that aims to investigate beyond manifest content should implement “methods that allow for the systematic identification of patterns in link and interactive message content, since these types of content are increasingly prevalent on the web” (Herring, 2010: 5). As one method of web content analysis, Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis can be used to analyze any kind of interpersonal communication on the web, synchronous or asynchronous (Herring, 2001). The rationale for using Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis is also due to the fact that there is currently no research done on Facebook political communication in Ethiopia with special emphasis on the discursive practices. Thus, this is an effort to contribute to bridging the research gap in this area and to determine whether Facebook has a potential to revive the public sphere by examining users’ interactive behavior.

There are also evidences demonstrating the internet’s negative aspects such as, replicating the dominance that exists in traditional media (Dahlberg, 2001), albeit a number of research showing its positive aspects as a medium that promotes plurality (Stromer-Galley, 2002, 2003) and opening avenues for novel users (Schneider, 1997) and many more. Witschge (2008) explains that the potential of the internet to promote democracy should be explained by examining the way in which people use the medium in addition to the need to avoid generalization about Computer Mediated Communication and to explain it in context.

Scollon and Scollon describe discourse in a simple way as “the use of language to accomplish some action in the social world” (2004: 2). Like many scholars, they also explain that this communicative process is made easy by ‘enabling technology’ surrounding discursive practices in the 21st century from the simplest to the most complex ones. Communication technologies influence discursive practices so much so that people have come up with new ways of communication specific to online spaces (Gruber, 2008). Consequently, contemporary discussions focus on the nexus between technology and democracy by pointing out the ability of new media technologies to enable participation and inclusion giving easy access for the masses. Therefore this study is also one among such geared towards this direction.
3.4. **CMC as data**

As mentioned earlier, the dual purpose of CMC as a field as well as a tool for gathering data (Mann & Stewart, 2000) has increased the popularity of internet-based research. The growing interest in investigating online discourse results from the ease of data collection, storage and analysis (Gruber, 2008). Herring (1996) also confirms this:

> “Where the tape recorder expanded the limits of human memory by enabling verbatim accounts of continuous speech to be recorded and transcribed, text-based computer mediation systems take us beyond the physical limitations of transcription by generating pre-transcribed data which are easily downloaded for analysis.”

In addition, using CMC as data can help the researcher avoid ‘Observer’s paradox’ which significantly affects research results by allowing them to remain invisible during data gathering (Herring 1996b). However, this ease of data collection also confronts the researcher with the ethical dilemmas of collecting data anonymously and that of revealing identity of subjects. Though there are no conventions in this regard, this decision should take into account the nature of the forum under study; whether they are “restricted” or “open-access” (ibid. 5). Therefore, I have taken some precautions to grant research subjects anonymity; for example, using initials instead of real names of discussants while taking some anecdotes of conversations.

3.5. **Sampling**

3.5.1. The Sampling Procedure

Unlike traditional media, social media possess a ‘convergence culture’ (McQuail, 1983) which gives audiences the freedom to shift roles at their convenience from consumers to producers and vice versa. Facebook has multiple features that offer users, among other things, the opportunity to share stories, engage in discussions and connect with people. The study had its focus on the comment threads and examined the discussions among Facebook users on political contents posted by two ‘friends’ selected for this study.

The sample for CMDA “should include, as much as possible, the typical activities carried out on the site” (Herring, 2004: 352). Hence, since the purpose of this study was to see not Facebook conversations in general but rather political discourse, the sites were selected because of the fact that they frequent posts with political content. When it comes to sample
According to Herring, “what counts as a sufficient amount of data will depend, therefore on the frequency of occurrence of the analytical phenomenon in the data sample, the number of coding categories employed to describe the phenomenon, and the number of external factors that are allowed to vary” (ibid: 352).

Bryman points out that in purposive sampling, the process is dictated by the purpose of the study in question. This means that “research questions are likely to provide guidelines as to what categories of people (or whatever the unit of analysis is) need to be the focus of attention and therefore sampled” (2012: 416). Herring points out that “[i]n CMDA, (sampling) is rarely done randomly, since random sampling sacrifices context, and context is important in interpreting discourse analysis results” (Herring, 2004:350). Therefore, since the purpose of this study was to analyze political discourse, only political posts were selected for this study.

Here it should be mentioned that a convenience sampling was made initially due to the absence of active Facebook forums that would have been appropriate in terms of selecting unifying topics and also large number of participants. Some researchers (Kushin and Kitchener, 2009) have used Facebook-based forums which in my case was not possible mainly because the internet penetration is next to nothing let alone the practice of such forums. Therefore, I relied on discussions on my own Facebook ‘wall’ which I have unlimited access to. The two ‘friends’ whose posts I analyzed were selected based on their popularity among Ethiopian Facebook users and therefore served as ‘forums’ that have the most users giving the study more chance for reliability. In addition to the large number of friends and followers, the two have frequent appearance on different media giving political analysis.

3.5.2. Sampling Criteria

At first, I selected 10 active ‘friends’ who regularly post status updates on their Facebook pages out of which I selected the two based on the criteria mentioned below. I used their initials to identify them as DB and AD. After checking their profiles and going through their posts for 20 days (the sampling frame includes posts from 1-20 February) and after a process of trying to come up with objective criteria, I developed the following set:
1. The number of Facebook ‘friends’ and followers they have: this means, the higher the number of ‘friends’ and ‘followers’ the more their status updates are read or seen. DB is a renowned blogger and an editor of a regional online news site in Ethiopia who has 4,985 ‘friends’ and 3,285 ‘followers’ on Facebook, whereas AD has 4,998 ‘friends’ and 10,367 ‘followers.’

2. In my experience on Facebook, users do not participate in the same capacity; some are more active than others in that they produce contents for discussion on their ‘wall’s and participate in the discussions as a result and others are more into just assuming passive roles, such as ‘liking’ status updates. So, the regularity of activities on Facebook, such as status updates with political content was the second criterion. This was also an indication that they are active users and I could use their posts as resources for discourse analysis. These two users update their statuses regularly; for a 20 days sample, I found 24 status updates on AD’s ‘wall’ and 22 on DB’s ‘wall’. I selected 10 of the most discussed posts from each ‘wall’ for this study.

3. Number of activities on their posts: they are usually ones who get the most ‘likes’ and comments for their status updates. On average, AD gets 150 ‘likes’ on his posts whereas DB gets 75. The number of comments also is considered; DB on average has 60 comments and AD has 58.

The time frame was the only randomly selected constituent in this research. As one of the sampling methods favored in this type of research, temporal sampling for selecting the posts is justified by the fact that it “preserves the richest context” (Herring, 2004: 351). However this type of sampling is not without a shortcoming. Herring points out that it has a tendency to shorten interaction by limiting the time frame or creating an unmanageable sample size. Therefore, to avoid the latter, I selected the first 50 comments on a thread.

One of the research questions that underpinned this research is whether Facebook promotes diversity or harbors fragmentation as manifested by users engaging in political discussions with ‘like-minded’ others. These two ‘friends’ are from different ends of the political spectrum in Ethiopia which means DB is pro-government whereas AD is from the opposition. This is demonstrated by their everyday posts on Facebook. Therefore, the assumption was that their political inclinations could create a good habitat for fragmented audience or lack
thereof would indicate the existence of diversity as the two ‘friends’ depict typical Facebook activity when it comes to political discussions in Ethiopia. The comment threads gave a good indication of the dynamic of participants because some of them were attended by a large number of them; the highest number of ‘likes’ (502) and the lowest (112) was found on AD’s post whereas it was 153 and 69 respectively on DB’s post.

The research questions for this study embodied the actual discourse, the way in which it was carried out or the discursive behavior as demonstrated by the content of discussions and also the overall dynamics of participants.

- To what extent does Facebook promote rational critical political debate?
- Does FB promote plurality or fragmentation?
- How civil is FB political discussion?

Though the research was able to answer these questions within the context of this study, it does not claim generalizability as these are just two of the multiple Facebook pages available. But it could give important insights into the discursive behaviors of Ethiopian Facebook users at the backdrop of the country’s media landscape. As it is the first of its kind in that it provides empirical evidence to questions of CMC research from the Ethiopian perspective, it will be a significant addition to the field of CMDA research in relation to new media and the public sphere.

3.6. Data Analysis

3.6.1. The Procedure

The data analysis process involved multiple stages of coding to translate the normative concepts in the research question “into measurable variables that are flexible enough to recognize deliberation in a variety of practical settings” (Black, Burkhalter, & Gastil, 2010). The coding categories were derived from existing theories, empirical research and borrowed from the works of different scholars. Stromer-Galley’s (2007) and Monnoyer-Smith, Taplin & Wojcik’s (2010) study which included coding schemes to examine the quality of online and face-to-face deliberations; Papacharissi’s (2004) study of civility in online discourse; and Freelon’s proposed three models of democracy for the study of online deliberation contributed by and large in developing the analytical categories for this study. This process was also facilitated by the constant comparison model proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to come up with coding categories most prominent within the data at hand. This approach to the
analysis of qualitative data combines “explicit coding and analytic procedures” (ibid.: 102) to allow coding categories to emerge from the data.

As indicated, this study applied a CMDA using the coding and counting method as outlined by Herring (2004b). Unlike traditional content analysis, this approach of CMDA does not analyze manifest content but specific discursive behaviors which are operationalized in the next section. The process involved a number of steps to ensure intracoder reliability (Bryman, 2012). Inter-coder reliability is difficult to achieve as this is an independent project, but I have attempted to ensure the former by repeating the process of coding as many times as pragmatically possible. This was followed by using the operationalization of analytical terms and finding specific evidences that became apparent in the analysis process.

The results of the coding are given in the next 5th chapter using percentages in each thread as well as qualitatively described and illustrated using anecdotes from comment threads demonstrating typical cases to increase the trustworthiness of the study. These results were not compared to each other as it was not the purpose of the study to see differences or similarities rather to examine discursive behaviors on Facebook demonstrated through “textual phenomena that can be directly observed” (Herring, 2004:355). This methodological design took on Herring’s suggestion that, “even rigorously quantitative CMDA analysis can benefit from a theoretically informed interpretative framework, “thick” description of users, systems, and contexts, and discourse examples to lend analytical nuance” (ibid. 369). Accordingly, the results have been supported by actual discursive evidences from the comment threads and interpreted using the conceptual framework of the study.

### 3.6.2. Analytical Categories

One characteristic of deliberation is the adherence to the topic of discussion (Stromer-Galley, 2007, Herring, 2003). Stromer-Galley (2007) points out that the extent to which discussants refer back to statements made by one another shows the extent of their engagement in the discussion and the extent to which discussants are listening to one another. By examining reciprocity in terms of the voicing of agreement or disagreement and adherence to or digression from topic, the study examined whether Facebook political discussion is “a true exchange of arguments or a set of monological arguments juxtaposed one after the other without any logical link” (Monnoyer-Smith, et al., 2010: 252). The coding procedure is explained in detail below.
1. The first step was to classify comments as response to topic, response to another participant, off topic or monologue/unresponsive. Then the first two categories were extracted for further analysis.

- **Response to topic**: identified by topic of discussion that identified each post: to use Stromer-Galley and Martinson’s (2005) word, structuring topic, and related topics that developed during the discussion process referred to as interactional topics (ibid.). Comments that were addressed to the poster (AD or DB) were also coded as Topic.

- **Response to another participant**: questions and responses to other participants by tagging names

- **Monologue**: expression of opinion without referring to anyone as if talking to oneself, rhetorical questions that did not seek any responses.

- **Off topic**: topics that did not have anything to do with the topic under discussion, links that were irrelevant to the topic under discussion

2. The second step was to further analyze the comments under the response to topic and response to another participant. The comments under the category Monologue and Off Topic were ruled out after the first stage because the study is focused on discursive behaviors that involved the exchange of ideas between at least two persons. As the exposure of participants to opposing points of view fosters deliberation (Witschge, 2004; Sunstein 2007), it was found important to examine the proportion of those who agreed and disagreed with the original post. Here, the comments were coded as Agree or Disagree or Neutral depending on their inclination towards the original post and their inclination towards posters’ political stands.

3. Furthermore, the direction of deliberation among participants, inter- or intra-ideological (Freelon, 2010) would answer the question of whether online media promote diversity by bringing people of opposing ideologies together in discussion or create clusters of publics who talk to like-minded others. Therefore in this stage, only comments that were labeled as response to participant were analyzed. Tagging was counted as a form of intra- or inter-ideological response or questioning based on whom the questions or the statements were addressed to. Therefore while coding tags, I traced back the names to find out whether they were supporting or opposing participants. Here, the further analysis of the discussions in terms of reciprocity,

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10 Tagging : https://www.facebook.com/help/124970597582337
beyond the count of Disagreement and Agreement, gave more details of weather interactions occurred between the like-minded or between people of diverse ideologies.

4. In an attempt to examine the extent to which discussions on Facebook approximated rational critical argument, the data under the Response to topic and Response to participant were subject to another round of analysis using the constant comparison model. Accordingly, the comments under the categories in number 2 were analyzed for their quality under generally five categories identified in the process. In this step of the analysis, the discussions were analyzed for their civility

- **Reasoned argument (RA):** links to media outlets shared in support of their argument, or using quotes from official sources. In addition, Stromer-Galley describes reasoned argument as accompanied by,

  “elaboration...in the form of further justification, a definition, a reason for holding the opinion, an example, a story, a statistic, or fact, a hypothetical example, a solution to the problem, further explanation for why the problem is a problem, a definition, an analogy, a consequence to the problem or solution, a sign that something exists or does not exist, or any further attempt to say what they mean or why they have taken the position that they have” (2007:10).

- genuine questions to solicit answers or information from poster or other participants were coded as **Reasoned** since they aided the deliberative process (ibid.).
- Comments calling for a reasoned argument were also coded in this category.
- Responses to genuine questions

- **Unreasoned:** a statement without any evidence, a link shared without any explanation,

- **Echoing:** simply repeating whole or part of original post or

- **Simple words of praise or encouragement:** or ideological back-patting in Kelly, Fisher, & Smith’s (2005) word or usage of extralinguistic features, such as thumbs-up symbol on the comment space (/thumb-up)

5. The two categories in step 2 (response to topic and response to another participant) underwent yet another stage of analysis to assess the extent to which the discussions were conducted in a civil manner. As Papacharissi describes incivility as the kinds of behavior that “threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and
stereotype social groups” (2004: 267), after constant comparison of the comments, I found two general categories in which this behavior manifested itself:

- **Insults**: personal attack (in words or pictures) against the poster, other participants in the discussion and others who were not part of the discussion.

- **Stereotypes**: derogatory group names

The analysis in each stage is demonstrated with numbers and words and is triangulated to come up with plausible conclusions that provide answers to the research questions.

### 3.7. Limitations of the Research Questions

This study by no means claims exhaustiveness as there are more concepts that need to be explored in relation to its purpose. It took only those that were possible to be answered within the context in which the study was conducted. For example, *equality* among discussants in terms of participation is another quality in democratic deliberation which is manifested by “the extent to which forum contributions are spread evenly among participants” (Freelon, 2010: 1182). However, within the context of this study, *equality* would be difficult to measure because participants do not enjoy the same privileges in terms of access to the internet as some are more frequent users than others. Thus, the frequency of participants within a given comment thread would also mean that they have better access to the internet. For this reason the study opted to shy away from this particular issue to avoid any misinterpretation. Therefore, though it fell short in this regard, it has definitely indicated some directions for future studies.

#### 3.7.1. Generalizability

This study would have benefited from the study of an internet political forum which would have provided unifying topics and large numbers of participants. However, due to the limited access to the internet, a forum is not very common in Ethiopia. Therefore the study in an attempt to improvise a forum chose the walls of two active internet users who were found to be the most active in terms of frequency of usage (utilizing Facebook on a daily basis for political purposes) and popularity (reaching a large number of users). Therefore, its generalizability is also limited to the two walls.

#### 3.7.2. Validity
The study is dependent solely on discourse analysis and does not use any other methods such as audience research; this has made it difficult to make bold claims based on the findings of the study. Audience research would have helped substantiate some of the answers to the questions, such as the fragmentation debate. However, due to the limitation of time and scope, the study is limited to the discourses carried out on Facebook and does not consider any other aspect of the discussions such as the demographics of participants. There is a chance that participants could assume different identities in participating in discussions on Facebook; however, there is no way of knowing their identities because of the high level of anonymity offered by Facebook. However, since the study focuses only on the discussions, this will not pose any problem on the validity of the discourse analysis in the context of this study.

3.7.3. Reliability

The reliability of this study emanates from the detailed outline and description of the analysis process and the explicit definition of the analytical categories used to examine the comments in the discussion. The study implemented the constant comparison model and used the analytical categories that recurred in the samples analyzed which means that any study that uses the same methods implements specific categories that emerge from the specific samples. However, replicability of this specific study is enhanced through the rich detail provided by the data analysis procedure.
4. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

This chapter gives brief background information on the Ethiopian media scene to help understand the context of the study and help explain the popularity of social media networking especially Facebook in Ethiopia, a nation with one of world’s lowest internet connectivity. Following a brief description of the current media topography in the country, the chapter gives some statistics in ICT usage in the African continent and maps out some recent researches into social networking sites in general and Facebook in particular.

4.1. The Ethiopian Media Environment

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia is the oldest independent country in Africa. Ethiopia follows a federal system of government with ethnically defined autonomous regions. There are more than 80 languages spoken in the country. Africa’s second most populous country with a population of close to 90 million had been a Monarchy until the military government took over power in 1974. The current government, Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in 1991 toppling the then president Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam in 1991.

The role of the media throughout the history of the country had been defined as “willing mouthpieces for the rulers”11. According to (Skjerdal and Hallelujah, 2009) private ownership of publications was out of the question as printing press was under the control of the military government. Skjerdal and Hallelujah explain, at the backdrop of this, the Press Bill of the early 1990s was the first of its kind as it guaranteed the existence of the “independent” press. This Bill of October 1992 was proclaimed by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the then Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE). Following this, the country saw a ‘mushrooming’ of private publications; 256 newspapers and 120 magazines were registered within the following five years during which more than half went out of publication (Skjerdal & Hallelujah, 2009).

It is evident that the independent press plays a great role in building a democratic nation. However, the development of the media in fulfilling its democratic role has been hampered by different internal and external factors. From the production side, private newspapers are poorly resourced as a result of low revenue from advertising, a situation which is different

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for the state owned newspapers that rely on government subsidies and subscription in addition to advertisements. In addition, low literacy rate, high rural concentration, poor infrastructure and other accumulated factors have hindered the development of press in Ethiopia (Press Reference, n.d). Ethiopia is one of the 11 Sub-Saharan countries with a literacy rate of below 50% which has negatively affected newspaper readership.12

Moreover, Skjerdal and Halleluja note that though access to public information was secured by the 1995 FDRE constitution, the private press has always suffered from the lack of access to government information, documents from government offices and press conferences. In their struggle for survival, the “independent press” had resorted to tabloidization in addition to aligning themselves with opposition parties. This has resulted in a high distrust of the private press by the government; they are seen as spreading “hate politics” instead of contributing to democratization (2009: 52). Consequently, the poor performance of the media in this regard is taken by the government to legitimize the marginalization of the private media in terms of access to public information whereas the private press blames the government’s action as the very reason for it. For this reason, the government continues to intimidate journalists working for the private media by jailing or forcing them to flee the country and as a result, many newspapers have ceased publication.13 As Vestal explains, the Ethiopian private press owes its declining number to the continuing harassment by the then transitional government (TGE);

“\textit{The FDRE has continued the practice of the TGE of harassing the private press by routine use of detention and imprisonment and the imposition of prohibitive fines and bail amounts on journalists and editors. It has detained more journalists in the past four years than any other African government}” (1999: 133).

This crackdown on the media also extends to online media outlets where in addition to the attack on journalists, the government has also taken measures of blocking websites of diaspora media and prohibiting public access to their content. Despite some official efforts by the government to improve the media legislations, the fact remains that “independent” media continually face informal attacks and exercise self-sensorship as well (Skjerdal, 2011). Though Ethiopia’s constitution Article 29 clearly prohibits any form of censorship,


and guarantees freedom of expression, the harassment against journalists became worse in 2011 and 2012 after the enactment of the Anti-Terrorism law of 2009, that prohibits reports about groups that are labeled as ‘terrorist’ by the government.\textsuperscript{14} This law uses ‘broad’ and ‘ambiguous’ wording and it has been condemned by international organizations for it sends out a chilling effect and prevents journalists from doing their jobs. Out of the 179 countries examined Ethiopia ranks \textsuperscript{137} which is 10 ranks lower than the previous year.\textsuperscript{15}

Due to the aforementioned factors, the media remains underdeveloped in terms of access and quality. Currently, there are 27 newspapers under operation in Ethiopia; 11 are state-owned newspapers whereas the rest 16 are private. Four of the state-owned newspapers circulate nationally and seven are only regional newspapers published in their respective languages. These publications rely on government subsidies and are distributed on subscription to different government offices. As clearly stated in different policy documents, state owned newspapers follow the \textit{development journalism} paradigm.\textsuperscript{16} The documents advocate for the promotion of government activities by emphasizing on success stories over critical reporting.

With a significantly low circulation rate, the number of private newspapers is far from meeting the large population’s demand for alternative views. According to the 2013 statistics by the Ethiopian Broadcast Authority, the number currently is as low as 16 weeklies; with a circulation ranging from 200 to 10,500. These newspapers cover a range of social, political and economic topics and some specialize in specific topics such as sports. 23 weekly, bi-weekly, monthly and quarterly magazines currently running raise the number of private publications. Most of these publications are metropolitan owing to the concentration of the educated elite in the urban areas. They deal with either a combination of political, social, economic topics or specialize in topics like health, construction and sport.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} (ibid.)
In such media scene where the majority does not have access to print media due to reasons mentioned above, broadcast media especially radio is of paramount importance in filling these gaps. However, despite promises of media liberalization in the early years of coming to power, broadcasting has been an exclusive domain of the state until 2006 when doors opened for private radio stations but television still remains under control (Skjerdal, 2011). Currently, there are five commercial radios and sixteen community radios licensed by the Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority to broadcast nationally in addition to the nine state/public radios.\(^{18}\)

The decrease in the number of private press has given rise to the flourishing of alternative media outlets such as social media and Diaspora media. However, they are far from fulfilling the ideals of the media. Terje Skjerdal in his article “Journalists or Activists? Self-identity in the Ethiopian diaspora online community” explains the diaspora online media as having a high tendency of criticism towards the government as a result of which professionalism is replaced by what he calls “activist journalism”. According to his study, the form and contents of most diasporic media are defined by the grievances of the diaspora community over the political atmosphere in their homeland (Skjerdal, 2011). Lyons in this regard explains that

> “...past and ongoing conflicts in the homeland serve as focal points of diaspora identities. A broad array of institutions and diaspora media maintain these identities and link the diaspora back to developments in the homeland” (Lyons, 2007:12).

These diasporic media are enabled by the existence of information technology, especially the internet, as Sereberny (2001:156) describes them “the diasporic medium par excellence.”

This sketch of the polarized media environment in Ethiopia could perhaps explain the recent popularity of Facebook and other social media networks. The state media on the one hand only serving the interests of the government promoting its development policies and on the other “independent” media promoting opposition agenda leave the country with a big gap in the media scene. Though the Diaspora media have suffered from government crackdowns, many continue to keep their followers up-to-date using social media networks. A few ordinary citizens are also actively participating on online forums and producing their own

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contents playing the role of informing the public and also creating a discussion topic for the public to involve in deliberation.

4.2. Internet connectivity

Ethiopia is a country with the lowest internet penetration rates in the world; ironically enough, despite being the second most populous country in Africa, internet penetration is second lowest in the continent. In a population of close to 90 million only a little more than one percent have access to the internet. Calandro, Stork and Gillwald (2012) in their research on 11 sub-Saharan African countries published on the Research ICT Africa policy brief No.2 explain that though internet penetration still remains low in most African countries, mobile phones are playing a big role in boosting internet connectivity across the continent. In this ICT access and usage survey, it is indicated that more than 80% of internet users in Ethiopia access the internet via mobile phones (2012). In comparison to other countries in the continent, the figure remains very low. However, internet penetration has been growing steadily over the years in Ethiopia; as compared to the 360,000 people in 2009 the figure (960,331) has more than doubled in 2012 with more than 600,000 people added to the network.

4.3. Facebook in Ethiopia

The use of the internet for social media networking such as Facebook is higher than for other purposes such as emails. Of the 960,331 internet users in Ethiopia, a significant number of them (902,440) are on Facebook. Statistics by Facebook shows that as of September 2013, there had been 727 million daily active Facebook users worldwide; the number increases significantly (874 million) if we include those who used it on mobile devices. 81% of these users are located outside the United States and Canada.

The popularity of Facebook has attracted many researchers from different disciplines. In their search for scientific peer reviewed articles, Caers et. al. (2013) report that 3068 hits were found using “Facebook” as a keyword. Their study focused on the psychological and economic aspect of the use of Facebook. Wilson et. al. also (2012) point out that in addition

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20 ibid
to its popularity, the amount of measurable data available as research material that can allow behavioral studies of media users like never before can be another major reason to study Facebook. They also add that the need to study the dangers as well as the benefits of online presence that comes with the popularity of such social networking tool also calls for another area of research.

Facebook users in Ethiopia are using the social networking site for different purposes; the most notable ones are discussions about local politics and lobbying and boycott campaigns for impact by using Facebook to circulate petitions among network of friends nationally and internationally. When the violence against Ethiopian domestic workers erupted in November 2013\(^{23}\), apart from heated discussions on Facebook, users circulated petitions to make an impact in stopping the violence. Other petitions also include one that lobbies for the correction of the name of a recently bought vessel by the Ethiopian Shipping Lines Authority\(^{24}\) and another to scrap the ‘extravagant’ rental contract for the retiring president of the country\(^{25}\). There was also a boycott campaign against a local brewery owned by Heineken for its plan to sponsor a concert tour of a popular Ethiopian singer who made a controversial remark about Emperor Menelik II, a campaign that finally forced the cancelation of the contract with the singer.

In addition to such activities on Facebook there are many discussions on various political issues going on every day. This social networking site is connecting societies from different corners of society like never before. As mentioned above, these and other activities can be used as research materials to make inquiries about different aspects of modern day societies. Therefore, the current research is an attempt to study the democratizing potential of Facebook in the Ethiopian society, living in the country or in the diaspora by implementing an analysis of the actual discursive practices using Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA).

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24 Correct the name on the Mekelle Vessel. http://www.change.org/petitions/correct-the-name-on-mekelle-vessel
25 Scrap the rental contract for president Girma’s house http://www.change.org/petitions/ethiopia-scrap-the-rental-contract-for-president-girma-house
5. DATA ANALYSIS

For pragmatic reasons, the study included only 20 status updates from two of the most popular Facebook users that are from opposite ends of the political spectrum in Ethiopia. Based on the sampling frame of 20 days, twenty of the most read and commented posts were taken. The number of hits was taken for an indication of the importance of the issues discussed in the posts or the extent of their controversial nature.

Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis was conducted through coding and counting of individual comments. The coding involved different stages to make sure that the analysis provided answers to the research questions that underpin the study (see above). Therefore, in this chapter the coding categories are briefly described followed by tables presenting the codes and findings demonstrated through examples from the analyzed samples. For pragmatic reasons, the samples were minimized to the first 50 comments of the 20 threads; this meant that all the comments were analyzed in five threads with less than 50 comments.

Discussions on Facebook are triggered by the posts on a person’s ‘wall’ that become public to ‘friends’ and ‘followers.’ Feedbacks are given to the specific posts through ‘likes’ and comments that address them or other participants in the comment threads. As the sample walls selected for this study deal with political subjects, the participants that take part in the discussions also directly and indirectly involve in them. Accordingly, the analysis assessed to what extent discussions on Facebook embodied critical nature by analyzing the comments’ adherence to topic and rationality, the participants’ diversity in terms of political inclinations and their level of civility in discursive engagement.

5.1. Rational Critical Deliberations

In response to the question of the extent to which critical deliberations were conducted, an analysis of the purpose and quality of comments was conducted in two stages. The first stage involved the coding of comments in terms of their purpose as Response to Topic (RTT), Response to Participant (RTP), Off Topic (OT), and Monologue (M). The second analyzed the extent to which claims are justified or backed up by reasons.

5.1.1. Adherence to the topic

Comments that dealt directly or indirectly with issues raised in the original post or those that addressed the poster were coded as RTT (refer to the Material and Method chapter for description of topics on posts). Adherence to topic was manifested through directly
addressing poster (praising or thanking him for his idea, or opposing him or the idea through different means ranging from reasoned argument to Flaming), and adding additional information to the post or just repeating all or part of the post.

Some comments directed at the poster addressed the main issue in the original post; for example, on AD’s post of February 11 about two political parties in Ethiopia (Arena Tigray for Democracy and Sovereignty\textsuperscript{26} and Tigray People’s Liberation Front, TPLF\textsuperscript{27}) TYB (AD Feb. 11) commented,

\textit{As you said, \#AD If tplf is Eritrean that mean the tigray people is Eritrean. Like the fruit is result of a tree, tplf is result of his people of tigray. So you can’t separate tplf from tigray and tigray from tplf.}

Others did not touch the topic but simply expressed agreement/disagreement with the topic, praised/ denounced poster for his views. For example, TK commented, “\textit{AD thanks a lot about your information. Hence, keep on God with you.” EN on the other hand expressed contempt, “\textit{Shame on you! Why u start the old hate filled politics?” These comments were coded as RTT because they expressed the participants’ opinion or feelings towards the original post albeit without making a mention of the content.

The comments under the second category (RTP) contained the same content as the comments coded as RTT except that they were directed at another participant in the thread. This category included both \textit{structuring} and \textit{interactional topics}. For instance, on DB’s post of February 10, the original post reported the Ethiopian Prime Minister’s response on the Ethio-Sudanese border; however, interactions among participants developed also into the Ethio-Eritrean border issue\textsuperscript{28} and the Nile water share agreements\textsuperscript{29} as well and all of them were coded as RTP.

In the two categories respectively, tagging\textsuperscript{30} the name of poster or other participants was taken as the main indicator of comments that were identified as responses and questions to topic or other participants. Messages that involved tagging involved more than one participant in the discussion therefore were coded as Responses to either topic (RTT) or participant (RTP). The assumption here was that interactional topics would emerge as a result of participants invited to take part in discussions.

\textsuperscript{26} The biggest opposition group in Tigray region
\textsuperscript{27} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tigrayan_People%27s_Liberation_Front
\textsuperscript{28} http://www1.american.edu/ted/ice/eritrea-ethiopia.htm
\textsuperscript{29} http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02508060.2013.744273
\textsuperscript{30} Tagging in the context of this study mostly involves the act of letting someone know that they are being talked about or inviting them to take part in a discussion. More information https://www.facebook.com/help/124970597582337
Off Topic (OT) comments and Monologues (M) on the other hand were comments that did not add anything to the discussion; they were comments that neither involved the topic of discussion nor were addressed to anyone in the thread. Therefore, common sayings in Amharic, English or Tigrigna that did not indicate any connection to the topic and statements or rhetorical questions directed at no one in particular were coded as Monologues (M). For example, a statement such as, FY: *One Ethiopia, one people, may racism vanish from our country amen!!!!* (AD Feb. 12) was coded as M. Statements which did not include any topics, major or minor, mentioned in the original post were coded as Off Topic (OT). As an example, the topic of AD’s post of February 20b was the lack of accountability in the Ethiopian telecommunications in relation to which it also included issues of justice, rule of law, citizen rights while DY commented:

*News from Bahirdar is, Hailemedhin’s relatives living in Ethiopia are now under Woyane’s custody; if any of them give interviews on any Ethiopian media, we should understand that they are at gunpoint.*

The coding of the 20 threads is demonstrated in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>AD</th>
<th>RTT #</th>
<th>OT %</th>
<th>RTP #</th>
<th>M %</th>
<th>∑ %</th>
<th>OT #</th>
<th>M #</th>
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<td>31</td>
<td>64</td>
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<table>
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<th>OT %</th>
<th>RTP #</th>
<th>M %</th>
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<th>OT #</th>
<th>M #</th>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.2 categorizes all comments in four categories mentioned above; Response to Topic (RTT), Response to Participant (RTP), Off Topic (OT), and Monologue (M). Except for two comments on DB’s post that were found unclear to read (Feb 1 and February 11b), all the comments on the two sets of samples were categorized under one of the four categories.

As is evident from Table 5.1, in both sets of samples, the majority of comments involved Responses To Topic. In almost all cases except two of AD’s posts (February 13, February 20, February 20b), more than 60% of the comments were responses to the original post or were directed at AD, thus were coded RTT. In one of his posts (February 11) in fact, more than a third of the comments (80%) belonged in this category. In DB’s case all except his post from February 11 (45%), more than half of the comments were responses to topic; in two of the posts (Feb. 6 and Feb 17), they were even as high as 72%.

Regarding interaction among participants, though in most cases it is significantly less than the interactions with the poster, there were two posts of AD from February 13 and February 20 in which there were more interactions between participants than with poster. On February 13 of AD’s post, the interactions among participants (42%) were slightly higher than those with poster (40%) whereas on February 20 RTP (44%) was much higher than RTT (34%).

A close examination of these cases revealed that the number of one-time participants in the threads was less than in the others where RTT scored higher than RTP which meant that there were more back and forth interactions between the same participants (Cf. Table 6.3 for the total number of one-time participants in each thread). Especially on February 20 DY appeared nine times whereas LE appeared five times in which cases the discussion mostly went back and forth exclusively between the two participants except occasionally LE tagged other participants asking them to witness the debate. Interestingly enough, having tagged six people who were not part of this specific comment thread, only one (RD) responded to the invitation who made just one comment about this back and forth discussion between LE and DY, “DY hohohohoh…..lecturer from NY..”

The cases above also demonstrated that the more participants engaged in back-and-forth interactions, the more they strayed from the topic of discussion. AD’s post claimed that the
reason Sudanese Al Bashir being the only president to visit Mekelle for the celebration of TPLF’s 39th anniversary was out of gratitude for a piece of the border land given to his country. The interaction between the two started when DY commented on LE’s denouncement of AD’s post as “hocus pocus”:

\[DY. \ LE: \ I \ know \ you \ want \ to \ say \ “hocus \ pocus”, \ but \ as \ usual \ TPLF \ stupids \ speak \ and \ write \ what \ they \ think \ is \ right \ but \ not \ what \ is \ right... you \ wanted \ to \ say \ “what \ you \ are \ saying \ is \ useless” \ but \ ignorance \ and \ stubbornness \ has \ tied \ you \ down \ (AD \ Feb \ 20)\]

In the rest of their interactions (four of LE’s comments and eight of DY’s comments), the two participants went back and forth commenting on each other’s lack of English knowledge and labeling each other. Interestingly enough, though DY finally provided the dictionary meaning to the word under argument, LE was too consumed with stubbornness to listen. In a similar manner, on DB’s post of February 2 where RTP was the highest (17) in the set, back-and-forth interactions of DY with ABA and DY with ChW resulted in a change of topic different from the original post that led to a discussion about the Ethiopian ruling party and opposition parties with participants labeling opposite sides in a similar manner as in the above example.

On this particular post, DB added a post script after his main topic (Prof. Mesfin’s speech about the Ethio-Sudanese border issue) that, roughly translated, read as:

\[P.S. \ Though \ I \ do \ not \ have \ the \ habit \ of \ using \ salutations \ on \ my \ Facebook \ posts, \ I \ used \ it \ for \ Mesfin \ to \ avoid \ hundreds \ of \ insults \ from \ his \ followers. \ Not \ that \ I \ worry \ about \ the \ insults \ but \ it \ prevents \ the \ decent \ (especially \ females) \ from \ participating \ in \ discussions \ (DB \ Feb. \ 2).\]

Following this concluding remark, of the 26 RTP comments, 17 of them were personal attacks on DB for ‘disrespecting’ the professor and only occasionally did participants discuss about the main issue, the professor’s speech or the Ethio-Sudanese border.

Another apparent feature is that, though there were more RTT than RTP, these interactions (RTT) were usually one way in which participants tagged the names of posters but posters seldom engaged in comment threads except few times when they were asked genuine questions that sought information. The maximum number of appearances DB made was on his post of February 17 in which he appeared five times responding to questions from participants or asking questions and on three of the posts (Feb. 10, Feb 11, Feb 11b) he made no appearances at all despite being tagged many times by participants (personal attacks rather
than questions or responses). In AD’s case, he appeared three times on February 20 and only once on February 1, 11, and 16 but he made none on the rest six cases.

Comments that belonged to the Off Topic category were ones that strayed from the topic of discussion, or did not take consideration of discussions between participants. Though they were mostly insignificant, AD’s post of February 20b had 17 Off Topic comments which constituted 34% of the total 50 comments in the thread. This thread exhibited the highest number of such comments of all the 20 threads whereas in DB’s post the highest was 11, 22% of the total 49 comments in the thread. One of the threads on AD’s post of February 16, there were no OT comments in this category as all of them adhered to topic or addressed a participant.

Monologues were significantly low and especially in two of AD’s posts (Feb. 11 & 16) there were none. The maximum frequency was seven in DB’s post of February 1 which constituted 14% of the total 50 comments. As an example of a Monologue on this particular post of DB’s BT commented “All warfare is based on deception.” -Sun Tzu, The Art of War. Such comments as indicated in the description for the coding did not include any explanations of their connection to the topic or to comments by participants. Evidently, such comments did not incite comments from other participants thus did not contribute positively to the discussions.

5.1.2. Quality of Arguments

Complementary to examining the adherence to topic, the second stage of analysis set out to examine the extent to which Facebook discussions resembled critical deliberations and it involved the analysis of the quality of discussions. It included comments that were coded in the first stage as Responses To Topic (RTT) and Responses To Participant (RTP); this meant that comments labeled as Off Topic (OT) and Monologue (M) were discarded. Here, when analyzing the rationality of comments, the analysis did not try to validate arguments but just examined to what extent claims made by participants were backed up by reasons or were just stated without any justifications.

After a constant comparison of the comments, five types of comments were identified; Reasoned (R), Unreasoned (U), Echo (E), Ideological Back-patting (IB), and Flaming (F). Reasoned comments were those in which the participant provided reasons for saying something, asked a genuine question for clarification, and responded to such. Comments in
which participants lobbied for reasoned arguments instead of personal attacks were also coded as R because ideally they positively contributed to the deliberative process. For instance, TTY (AD Feb, 20b) after witnessing a series of personal attacks on AD, commented:

Guys, I respect AD’s idea as well as U too. However, as I understand he put in words what he feels so why not we escape from generalization and focusing on him rather on idea, to challenge his idea with our ideas (what we believe).

Unreasoned(U) comments were on the other hand, those in which the participant just expressed feelings or opinions without reasons. Comments such as, Sad, wow...or any statements that did not have any justifications for holding the expressed opinion or feeling. Some participants just repeated part of the poster’s statements without adding their own in which case the comments were coded as Echo (E). Comments in which the Echoes accompanied a participant’s own statements were coded as R or U depending on their content. Statements of appreciation, gratitude, encouragement, and praise were coded as IB (Ideological Back-Patting).

Instances of Flaming were identified by personal attacks through offensive words or insults in English, Amharic or Tigrigna languages and those advocating violence. Using derogatory names such as ‘Woyane’\textsuperscript{31} to refer to the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) which is claimed to have the majority of government seats in Ethiopia and ‘Shabia’ to refer to the Eritrean government have been coded as F. Regardless of how reasoned comments were, when they were found to contain even one instance of Flaming, they were coded as F. A summary of the coding of the five categories is demonstrated on the next page.

\textsuperscript{31} Woyane is a Tigrigna word that originally represented the rebellion that started from the Tigray province of Ethiopia but later became a loaded term to refer to the government of Ethiopia. http://www.etiomedia.com/press/why_angry_over_enc.html
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RTT+RTP</th>
<th>AD</th>
<th>Reasoned</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Unreasoned</th>
<th>Echo</th>
<th>IB</th>
<th>Flaming</th>
<th>%</th>
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Table 5.2 Quality of Comments

5.1.2.1. Reasoning in Comments

As can be gathered from Table 5.2, threads are characterized by the scarcity of Reasoned arguments in both cases although DB’s displays reason more than AD’s. Only on four of DB’s posts, a little over half of the comments were reasoned whereas on AD’s, all the threads demonstrated low levels of reason especially on February 4 where only 13% of the comments were reasoned. Reasoned comments showed a decrease of 11% in AD’s post compared to DB’s as Reasoned comments constituted on average 29% of the former while it was 41% in the latter.
DB’s post of February 10, with a total of 46 comments, had the least number of participants (22). This was due to the fact that the thread involved repeated participants who were committed to proving their point by appearing again and again adding more information to their previous arguments. EA for instance was such kind of participant who appeared 12 times on this single post, of which nine were coded as *Reasoned*. On all of the appearances, EA made Reasoned arguments through quoting officials such as the late prime minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi.

Reasoned arguments were also made through detailed explanation of one’s position. For example, on February 17 DB expressed his outrage about western journalists’ ‘disrespect’ for the Ethiopian prime minister to which NA responded:

  *Why did they “let” the foreigners “disrespect” the PM? Westerners tend to have a very very different relationship with their political leaders than Ethiopians do. Leaders are servants, not gods, and they should be scrutinized, not glamorized or romanticized. I would never stand up simply because a politician entered the room, ESPECIALLY not as a journalist. (DB Feb. 17)*

Another provided a more detailed explanation, which was twice as much as the size of the previous one, in agreement to DB’s position that one should not take offence at such acts because Ethiopia depends highly on foreign aid and made a remark in the end: …*hope this kind of pointless grudge doesn’t cross the minds of Ethiopian officials.*

There were indications that some participants were mindful of participants’ comments as well as the content of the poster in that they suggested ways in which the deliberations could be effective. In addition to the ones that supported their arguments with justifications, some participants advocated for Reasoned arguments instead of personal attacks; Reasoned participants pleaded with ones that engaged in back-and-forth *Flaming* with one another.

  *(BA: KT and SB why don’t you forward ideas that can educate people instead of insulting each other and others. This is a lack of knowledge; try to correct wrongs with knowledge, insults don’t change minds. I wrote this because you guys jump to personal attacks; let’s stick to ideas. (AD Feb 20b)*)

There were also cases of *Reasoned* comments in which a participant gave advice to emotional participants to avoid such behavior. Some even aired out frustrations about the lack of adherence to topic. An example of this is SS’s comment on DB’s February 15 post: *“Most opinions are hotchpotch as opposed to the gist of the writer’s post. That leaves us without solution to the cancer of our identity.”*
On the other hand, Unreasoned comments ranged from simple statements that expressed participants stand in relation to the post or their political views to some that made bold unjustified claims such as, *ChW*:

> *Your party’s political credibility, if it has any, will become zero the moment you assimilated with Andinet\(^{32}\) and other chauvinist camps. Just mark my word!* (AD Feb 11)

There were several instances of participants forwarding genuine questions soliciting for more information and justification for opponents’ positions, cases that were coded as *Reasoned*. For instance, on AD’s post of February 13 about his view of TPLF’s mission to give Eritrea its independence, AlDo asks another participant AS to explain the position he expressed in his seven previous appearances in the thread:

> *AS can you tell us why tplf fought for them and endorsed what minilik did. Even without negotiating our legitimate sea access. Don’t you think it is a shame our citizens fought to give away our national interest.*

In a close examination of the interactions, it was evident that posters did not always answer questions from participants even when their names were tagged in questions. Posters tended to provide answers to genuine questions that adhered to the topic and asked for clarifications, more information on the topic and reassurance on claims. An example of a genuine question on the issue of the Ethio-Sudanese border that DB posted on February 2 was CY’s question in which he tagged DB and asked: *does that mean land has been donated to Sudan already? What is the true story behind Ethiopia-Sudan border?* To this question DB answered: *CY I never worry in this regard because I know that Ethiopia is under the rule of a responsible government.* On the other hand, on AD’s post of February 20b, SH tagged AD to ask his opinion about an issue that was irrelevant to the topic under discussion; a question that AD did not give answer to. There were also cases in which genuine questions even with no name tagging were answered from participants. For example, KL asked a question tagging no one and added a remark in parenthesis *(Answer only If you know the answer)* which was answered by AS.

Evidences show as mentioned earlier that the ideological stand of posters was constantly on the back of the minds of participants. A qualitative analysis of all the threads revealed that even in discussions of unifying subjects concerning the national interest, such as the Grand

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\(^{32}\) Andinet is one of the opposition parties in Ethiopia: [https://www.andinet.org/](https://www.andinet.org/)
Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile, EPRDF emerged at some point in all 20 of them. A case in point is: HA’s comment on DB’s post of February 1:

Had EPRDF been an inclusive political governance, in which all ethnic groups and economic classes have a trust, Ethiopia wouldn’t have downed on her knees to beg the opportunist China or whoever to have the dam completed. This the cost of having an exclusive political institution that benefits few groups and individuals at the expense of the broad majority. Who cares about a failed state 😂

Even in a discussion of such a universal topic as Racism in AD’s post of February 16, some participants diverted the discussion in relation to opposition political parties. For instance on this post AS instead of commenting on the post, resorted to scrutinizing the motives of the party AD represents. He claimed that it is an insult for ARENA to claim to denounce racism.

5.1.2.2. Ideological Back-patting

Ideological Back-patting was more a feature of AD’s posts than DB’s and was displayed through expressing likes, appreciations and gratitude. On February 12, sixteen comments were coded as such, a number that was even the highest of all the comments in the other categories of the thread. In three other threads (Feb. 4, 11, 16) as well, AD’s posts displayed more IB comments than Reasoned arguments. In general, AD’s posts exhibited seven IB cases on average whereas in DB’s case it was minimal (2).

Cases of Ideological Back-patting ranged from brief statements such as, KA’s logical as usual (AD Feb.12) to longer sentences like TA’s

Dear AD...son of Ethiopia...God bless you!!! You always speak to the point and the truth. You know how to keep focus on your social justice activism. Man of social justice!!!! God bless you. (AD Feb. 20b)

Writers of such kinds of comments did not include any justifications for their claims and yet the number of likes on the comments was indication that more participants also held similar attitudes. For example, YAC’s simple comment on AD’s post of Feb 12, “this is the best of the posts written on identity these past few days” got nine ‘likes’. There was also only one case of IB from AD where in his post of February 16 about Racism, AD appeared in the comment thread only once to thank participants for the comments they gave him.

IB comments were also given with pictures as in the following two examples:

33 http://hornaffairs.com/en/category/grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam/
5.2. Flaming

As can be seen on Table 5.2, the quality of arguments also involved the analysis of the extent to which participants engaged in civil discussions with each other. This involved the analysis of comments not only in terms of reasoning but also in terms of the manner in which those reasons were presented to participants. Some comments had just one instance of uncivil behavior whereas others had several and even included vulgarity, both of which were coded as Flaming. Regardless of the extent of reasoning, just an instance of uncivil remarks was enough to render them Flaming (F).

Flaming was found to be a common feature of discussions. There were no threads without instances of Flaming and the lowest number of such cases on one thread was four (DB Feb. 15). Both AD and DB’s post exhibited proportional instances of Flaming where both scored around 12 instances per post on average although there was one particular case on DB’s post in which Flaming was twice as much. On DB’s post of February 6 almost half of the comments (24) in the thread exhibited at least one form of Flaming whereas the highest number on AD’s case was 15.

These instances occurred not only when participants threw words of Flaming at each other but also when they are directed towards people who were not part of the discussion as participants. In other words, the presence of Flaming regardless of where it is directed at was coded as such. One exception is, in cases where participants quoted other participants that
used indicators of *Flaming*, comments were coded in other categories depending on their quality.

Some comments were reasoned enough to refute claims made by the poster; they provided reasons for their claims but because they had instances of uncivil remarks, they were reduced to *Flaming*. Commenting on DB’s post on Professor Mesfin’s controversial remark about AD quoted by DB, *...Tigray has never produced anyone who is as open-minded, far-sighted and rational thinker as AD....* In response to his concluding remark implying that the Professor needed psychiatric examination, BST reprimanded DB about his reaction to the professor’s exercise of freedom of expression and recommended that DB forwards his idea about the substance of the statement not on the personality of the professor. However, this comment (BST: DB Feb 6) was accompanied by an uncivil comment about the late Ethiopian prime minister which meant that the comment was reduced to *Flaming*.

Just as there were instances of participants who, in most of their appearances engaged in *Flaming*, there were also repeated participants who not only used reason to communicate but also did a good job at civil discussions and explained their position patiently in detail. On the other hand, though it was not common practice, there were a couple of instances of denying an opponent’s right to participate in discussions where HeA wrote: *#AS it is not ur place, don’t stick your nose where it doesn’t belong* (AD Feb. 16). There were also a few cases in which participants did not write a single word but posted offensive pictures: For example,

(SA, DB Feb. 6) (BY, AD Feb. 2)
Though not very common, stereotyping was also another feature in which Flaming was exhibited. AT’s comment on DB’s post of Feb 6 was an instance of stereotyping an ethnic group.

Wow!! This is a true statement... the professor said this because he was impressed with AD’s different way of thinking in these times when the people of Tigray think alike like factory products.

Derogatory names such as Woyane were also very common in discussions. Some used the name repeatedly as in the case of one comment on DB’s post about the return of the former Mayor of Addis Ababa from his PhD studies in London. TZK: PhD or not, no one would hire a Woyane so he brought his Woyane ass back to Woyaneville. There was another case in which a participant on AD’s post of February 20 used the word Nazi to refer to the Ethiopian government.

5.3. Diversity of Participants

The last stage of analysis involved the examination of the extent to which diversity was represented in Facebook discussions in the context of this study. Diversity here meant the coexistence of difference of opinions in Facebook as a forum for political discussions in the 20 posts taken as samples. The analysis was conducted through the further analysis of comments coded as Response to Topic (RTT) and Response to Participant (RTP) in terms of their inclination toward or away from the original posts as well as the political views of posters in general.

5.3.1. Supporters Vs Opponents

In response to the fragmentation debate, the proportion of agreeing and disagreeing comments under the Response to Topic and Response to participant were coded and counted as Agree, Disagree or Neutral excluding those comments from repeated participants whose inclinations have already been counted in these categories. This stage of analysis also excluded the comments of the posters in the comment threads as they themselves are used as references to examine participants’ political inclination. In AD’s case, comments were coded as (A) Agree when they demonstrated support for his post or expressed antigovernment views in general in relation to the post while in DB’s case pro-government sentiments were coded as such.
Comments that expressed agreement through repeating the idea of the poster, praising the poster for it, corroborating the information on the post or expressing contempt through insults, stereotyping and labeling the opposite side were coded as Agreement (A). On the other hand, those that expressed views that were different from the posters’ either in relation to the post or their ideologies as pro-government or opposition. While Flaming, to the direction it was meant, indicated Disagreement, Ideological Back-patting indicated Agreement; therefore, these cases were carefully analyzed for accuracy.

Neutral comments were those that comprised opinions on the deliberative process without taking sides; those that asked genuine questions or clarification on posts, etc. These comments, except just a couple (in DB’s thread) found unclear to be grouped under any of the categories, did not signify the participants’ stand in relation to either the posters’ message or their ideological stand in relation to Ethiopian politics.

The coding of diversity is demonstrated in the tables below; the coding for Agreement, Disagreement and Neutrality for the two sets of samples is done separately on the next page.

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<th>Date of post</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
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Table 5.3 Diversity in AD’s Posts
Table 5.4 shows the proportion of opposing (D) and supporting views (A) in AD’s posts in the ten samples examined for AD’s posts. The total number of comments examined included those from one-time participants. As can be seen generally, in all of the posts except one, the number of participants who agreed with AD was larger than those that disagreed. Except for February 10 in which the number of disagreeing participants was half of the total number of one-time participants, the majority of participants held the same views as AD. The highest percentage (82%) of Agreement was scored on February 4 whereas the lowest (22%) was on February 10. Only on one thread did the number of comments coded as Disagree surpass those coded as Agree. Most of the comments coded as Disagree on this thread involved accusations to AD for the ‘false’ information he gave out on his post about the return of the former mayor of Addis. MA for example commented: *You told us before that he fled his country liar!*

On DB’s case, as can be seen in Table 5.4, contrary to the case of AD’s posts, the majority of comments constituted Disagreement. Six threads (Feb. 2, 6, 9, 11, 17, 20) exhibited Disagreement in more than 50% of the comments whereas in three of them (Feb. 10, 11b, 15), the percentage was relatively lower but still significant. In all cases except February 1, the number of Disagreeing comments was higher than those in support.
DB’s post of February 20 about the changing of the name of Mekelle Vessel\textsuperscript{34} ironic comments were coded as Disagree because they showed that those participants were not in support of what DB stands for (advocating the change of name). AG for example expressed his disagreement through irony as ‘\textit{?’s liberation front, congratulations. KKKKK…} Some were more into the expression of their views in which case their inclination became clear for coding as in the case of SB: \textit{This diatribe tells you just one thing: how disillusioned this chap DB is. Thanks DH for finding a perfect Chinese New Year gift for our second rate cadre!} DH was one who posted a picture of a Chinese man ready to throw a punch. Yet other participants were interested in telling the reason for their position. EJ’s comment on DB’s post of February 1 lobbying for a coordinated action for the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam depicted a clear stand in relation to the topic under discussion as well as his political inclination. \textit{Tell Bereket Simon first free the political prisoner and we can align with our gvt to challenge Egypt in all possible forms.} This comment was coded as Disagree because the participant set a condition for supporting DB’s call and showed that EJ is from the opposition camp who advocate for the release of political prisoners.

Neutral participants included those that were interested in getting information by asking genuine questions such as, \textit{AY:U sure DB?} (DB Feb 1) and those commenting on how discussions should avoid \textit{Flaming} and only involve rational arguments were coded as Neutral.

\textbf{5.3.2. Reciprocity}

In addition to analyzing the presence of difference, an analysis of ideological reciprocity in discussions was conducted by examining the interaction of participants with one another. Interactions were coded as RA (Intra-ideological) or ER (Inter-ideological) depending on whether they interacted with like-minded others or readily sought out participants from opposing political views respectively.

This stage of analysis complemented the analysis of the proportion of supporting and opposing participants in a thread because having analyzed the inclination of participants in the previous stage, it became easy to examine whether the interactions were \textit{Inter-} or \textit{Intra-ideological}. It was easy to code the reciprocity between participants whose inclinations had already been coded as \textit{Agree} or \textit{Disagree} in the previous process but it was difficult to apply

\textsuperscript{34}http://www.tigliaonline.com/articles/mekele-ship-name-changed.html
the same coding for interactions in which one of the participants was coded as Neutral. Therefore, eight out of the total 118 comments coded as RTP on AD’s posts and five out of DB’s were found to be unknown and were labeled as such. The analysis of reciprocity is demonstrated in the table on the next page.

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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.5 Reciprocity in AD & DB’s Posts
The above table demonstrates that the majority of discussions that took place between participants occurred between those from different ideological backgrounds. In all the 20 comment threads, intra-ideological reciprocities were very minimal especially in three threads, two from AD (Feb. 4 and Feb. 10) and one from DB (Feb. 9b) where no such interactions occurred. Generally, on average, a third of the interactions between participants were found to be between people of different political inclinations; the least being 50% whereas the highest was 100%.

Just as in the way tagging helped identify adherence to topic, here again interactions between participants were made obvious with tagging or by using the sign @ to show whom the responses or questions were directed at. At this stage, continuous reference back to the previous stage of coding was made to examine whether the participants interacting with each other came from the same or different ideological backgrounds.

On another level, since it was evident that there were more Inter-Ideological than Intra-Ideological interactions, it was found important to analyze to what extent these interactions between different views involved rational and civil deliberations. Though the average instances of Flaming on both sets of samples was more or less proportional for the RTT and RTP comments coded on the first stage, in relation to inter-ideological discourse, some differences were observed. The analysis of the Inter-Ideological discussion for the extent of civility revealed that instances of Flaming were more evident in AD’s posts as they constituted 56% on average on AD’s post while they were significantly fewer (28%) in DB’s case.

Interestingly, though Flaming was observed more on AD’s case, most of these instances of Flaming were not directed at him; instead, they expressed anti-government sentiments and were directed towards participants who disagreed with AD’s posts and expressed pro-government attitudes. In DB’s posts on the other hand, unlike AD’s posts, he was tagged in most of the Flaming instances which means that they were mostly directed at him or public officials affiliated with the government.

There were two cases in AD’s posts and three in DB’s where there were no cases of Flaming which were also cases that exhibited a significant number of reasoned arguments. For example, DB’s post of February 10 in which all of the 10 Inter-Ideological discussions involved Reasoned interactions. The same was true in AD’s post of February 14 in which, of the eight cases of Inter-Ideological cases, six of them were Reasoned and two were
Unreasoned claims. Back and forth discussions which were Intra-Ideological, have been counted in every occurrence. However, there were also cases in which the majority of the Inter-Ideological interactions were found to be Unreasoned. The case of the interaction between DY and ChW on DB’s post of February 12 in which the former appeared eight times and the latter six times, both engaged in back and forth discussions that mostly involved Unreasoned claims. In most of the back and forth interactions, usually between two people, other participants in the thread assumed the bystander position and seldom took part or just got on with their own interactions with the poster, except for the ones that commented on the manner of discussion.
6. CONCLUSION

This last chapter of the study has been divided in three sections. The first section briefly recaps the findings of the analysis in themes from the previous chapter. In the second section, the findings have been related to the theories and discussion mentioned in an earlier chapter by way of answering the research questions that underpin this study. And the final section identifies some loophole in this research field and suggests future direction in further developing this research as well as new media research in general.

6.1. Summary of Findings

This study is an attempt to capture and explain an important phenomenon that continues to impact the political sphere in Ethiopia. It constituted the analysis of actual discursive practices that gave indications of the political utility of a social networking site, Facebook. In an attempt to provide answers to the three research questions explained below, the study triangulated the findings from the previous chapter. This chapter thus provides an interpretation and conclusion based on the empirical evidences from the two sets of samples analyzed for the purpose of the study.

Research question 1 sought to examine the rationality of political conversations on Facebook by analyzing the extent to which participants adhered to the topic and also support their claims with reasons while engaging in argument with other participants and with poster. The analysis of Response To Topic did not just simply identify the direction of interaction, but it also involved the analysis of the nature of discourses, whether they involved reasoning, mere unjustified claims or Flaming.

For the most part, the analysis revealed that more interactions occurred between participants and poster; only a couple of atypical cases appeared in AD’s posts in which the interaction between participants was more than the interaction with the poster. As explained in the previous chapter, Responses to Topic were identified by comments addressing the poster. These cases did not merely depict adherence to topic as participants also significantly used personal attacks in an attempt to get their points across. The proportion of Reasoned arguments to the combination of other kinds of comments showed that more than 50% of only four comment threads, all of which belonged to DB, constituted reason. On all of AD’s posts, reason remained lower; in one of the threads it was even as low as 13%.

Though they scored the highest in most of the cases, interaction with poster were usually one way. The tagging of the names of posters for responses or questions was frequent, but
posters only responded to genuine questions that were manifested through request for further explanation or more information from the poster. Posters rarely appeared on comment threads and in cases they did, they talked past those who strayed from the topics, used Flaming and addressed other participants. Posters were more into giving out information usually loaded with personal opinions or acting as insiders; the series of information on AD’s posts were appreciated by participants, as demonstrated by the number of IB comments.

The cases where the Responses to Participants were more than the Responses to Topic could be taken as indication that participants listen to each other, to use Stromer-Galley’s (2007) expression; however, a close examination of these cases did not demonstrate high reciprocity among participants; they were just cases that resulted from back and forth interactions between the same two or three participants in the threads. These cases were in fact the bottom two cases where the number of one-time participants was the least. These cases also revealed that participants engaging in back and forth discussions were more into proving a point by sticking to their original idea that started the argument than trying to listen or consider one another’s point of view. One of the threads in which these kinds of exchanges occurred demonstrated that the more participants went back and forth exclusively in their exchanges, the further away they strayed from the original topic. The other case on the other hand depicted a case where discussions developed into other related topics and participants engaged in reasoned exchanges.

In an endeavor to provide answers to the fragmentation debate, this study analyzed the level of diversity in comment threads in terms of agreement, disagreement and neutrality. Except on very few comments that were coded Neutral, participants clearly aligned themselves with or against the posts or the political stands of the posters. The two sets of samples displayed different characteristics in that AD’s post displayed more number of agreement on almost all of the threads except one. The cases showed that a great share of the threads contained participants who agreed with or supported AD for the information he gave out or for the opinions he expressed in his posts. The majority of the comments on DB’s case on the other hand displayed more disagreement than agreement.

Since the mere presence of diversity did not say much about the interaction, an additional analysis of reciprocity was conducted on the comments coded as Response to Participant. The analysis of reciprocity in this study complemented the analysis of the presence of diversity because since it involved the study of a forum, the focus was on examining
interactions between participants. This helped in substantiating the findings of the previous analysis by examining the exchange of arguments between participants, whether these interactions took place between like-minded participants or those who held different opinions regarding posts or political ideologies. The findings of the analysis revealed that in all twenty cases, Inter-Ideological reciprocity characterized the majority of interactions between participants.

The analysis of opposing and supporting participants gave indication of the extent of participants’ exposure to difference and the analysis of reciprocity contributed to further understanding the manner in which participants engaged in discussion with people of different ideologies. DB’s case painted a bright picture of Facebook’s ability in facilitating the exposure of participants to different opinions but AD’s case showed the case of differentiation of participants seeking out their like-minded others. The analysis of reciprocity in this regard confirms the former by showing participants’ engagement in discussion with those who held different opinions.

Regarding the manner of discourse, the findings showed that uncivil comments characterized, to a certain level, the expression of dissent against posters or other participants. Flaming manifested itself in different forms and different levels ranging from labeling of individuals to stereotyping political parties and ethnic groups. Though the levels differed, all the threads contained Flaming. Additionally, an analysis of civility on interactions that involved Inter-Ideological reciprocity was conducted to examine how participants handled their differences. This revealed that the percentage of Flaming in Inter-Ideological interactions is twice as much in AD’s posts than DB’s. Contrary to the analysis of overall civility where no Flaming-free threads appeared, five threads of Inter-Ideological interactions that did not involve any form of Flaming were found.

### 6.2. Discussion

This study relied on a small sample size both in terms of quantity and diversity. The analysis involved a number of stages of repeated coding to achieve higher reliability. Though it is difficult to make bold claims without substantiating the findings with other methods such as in-depth interviews with participants (which was not possible in the context of this study due
to the small number of internet users in Ethiopia), within the context of this study some interesting characteristics of the political discussions and Facebook have been identified.

Due to the fact that this study was conducted over a short period of time, it was forced to cut sample sizes to only first 50 comments of each thread. Though the number of comments on the threads ranged from 43 to 177, they were minimized in order to maintain uniformity among all the threads. But within the context of the current study, the fact that one of the cases disproved it indicates that it could be premature to disregard the fragmentation debate and on the other hand it also gives a glimmer of hope that Facebook could be a locus for the diversity of discourses.

As the posters whose ‘wall’s have been analyzed in this study have the maximum number of friends, this means that they have no control over who follows their posts. Facebook’s privacy settings allow one to follow someone without being friends with them which also means that one can participate in discussions of their posts. However, as can be gathered from the findings of this study, though it is mostly up to users to choose the kinds of discourses they want to pursue, most of the participants in AD’s posts aligned with him whereas the majority of those on DB’s posts differed in opinion from him. Though users have control over who to follow when it comes to political posts especially those journalists or public figures with large number of friends who continue to use Facebook to express their political views that become accessible to many, one set of samples in this study showed that Agreeing participants dominated the thread.

These results can be scrutinized in two ways. On the one hand, contrary to Utopian views that take for granted the democratizing potential of the internet regardless of the social and political contexts in which it exists, this study found out that despite the option of following public profiles (in the context of this study) made possible by the privacy settings of Facebook, the case of more like-minded participants assembling in threads proves that the notion of technological determinism is no longer valid at least in the context of this research. Accordingly, it seems simplistic to think of Facebook as the public sphere incarnate simply because of its special features.

On the other hand, in confirmation to features of the re-radicalized version of the public sphere proposed by Dahlgren, since the findings demonstrated that discourses with anti-

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35 One can follow posts of public figures without being friends with them
https://www.facebook.com/help/www/279614732052951
government sentiments dominate the comment threads (on AD’s post, the number of supporting views surpassed opposing ones whereas it was vice versa in DB’s case), the contribution of Facebook to democracy can be acknowledged in creating a platform for challenging mainstream discourse, hence for challenging dominance. Furthermore, as Schudson (1998) explains discussions in homogeneous groups could serve as a training ground for participants’ who choose to engage in heterogeneous groups. Thus, in light of these two points, it may be unreasonable to discard fragmentation as an antithesis to democracy.

In addition, that these ‘friends’ whose ‘wall’s have served as samples have around 5,000 ‘friends’ does not mean that they all engage in the discussions; the maximum number of comments found within the samples was 177 as opposed to the maximum number of ‘likes’ which was 502. Considering the number of people who actually saw the posts, it can be concluded that Facebook embodies Maia’s (2007) notion of the “sphere of visibility” that exposes users to a diversity of discourses. But at the same time, the fact that the number of participants who ‘liked’ the posts was more than those who commented on them conforms to the argument (Papacharissi, 2002; Dahlgren, 2006) that the enabling nature of the internet has not been able to remedy the political cynicism existing in today’s society that tends to assume a passive role in relation to political discussions.

When it comes to rationality in political discussions, reasoning in comments of the two sets of samples given the fact that only a small fraction of the population gets access to Facebook, the occurrence of this much Reasoning in discussions (on average 1/3 of the discussions) maybe reason to believe in Facebook’s potential for providing a platform for rational deliberation. There are indications that some participants read people’s comments in that they comment on the overall process by suggesting some ways in which the discussions could be better. Thus, the level of reasoning found on the analyzed threads, including the rare cases of attentive participants who act as mediators lobbying for critical and civil discussions on Facebook could be indications that there is hope for Facebook’s potential for an effective public sphere.

However, the less frequent discursive engagement of participants between each other and withdrawal of posters from the discussion threads does not depict an ideal case of a democratic public sphere in Bohman’s (2004) explanation that involves thoughtful consideration of each other’s opinions. Evidently, repeated participants were too stubborn to even consider arguments from opposite sides as they usually got carried away in their own
thoughts. Apparently these back-and-forth exchanges between exclusively two participants proved an antithesis to a true exchange of opinions that can extend the public sphere because they did not invite other participants into the discussion. In other words, this does not hold true for the discursive inclusion (Dahlberg, 2001) idealized in a public sphere. Therefore, contrary to the deliberative model of democracy

Regarding civility, though Flaming was a common feature of the analyzed political discussions, the fact that they constituted on average only 30% of the comments shows Facebook’s potential as a locus for civil discourses that according to Papacharissi (2004) promote democracy.

### 6.3. Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this study incline towards the conclusion that, considering the context of this study, Facebook has a potential to be a legitimate locus for political discussions. Some distinct characteristics have been observed in the two sets of samples (Opposition and Pro-Government). Therefore, future research could benefit from larger and more diverse samples because the fact that the two sets of samples in this study did not yield the same results calls for further examination of the fragmentation debate in order to make conclusions accordingly. In addition, the scholarship in this topic would benefit from a combination of methods the results of which can provide concrete answers to current questions. Future studies in this regard could also make an analysis of the sociopolitical contexts in which these discussions occur.

Though it is not the purpose of this study to make comparisons of the two sets of samples, one cannot help but wonder whether the restrictive media environment has something to do with the more Ideological Back-patting in AD’s posts and larger Disagreement in DB’s posts which meant that opposition discourses gained more desirability. Therefore, further research could explore Facebook’s potential as an alternative public sphere giving access to marginalized discourses by implementing, inter alia, audience research examining the extent to which this social network is used as a source of information.
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