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Framing Public Dissent: A Comparative Content Analysis of Local and International Media Coverage of the Ethiopian Health Professionals' Strike

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Abstract

This study investigated how local and international media outlets framed the 2025 Ethiopian health professionals' strike, specifically the British Broadcasting Corporation's Amharic and the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation. Forty-five Purposively selected stories published over two months were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The study examined the tone, thematic emphasis, voice representation, and underlying ideological messages in news articles from media outlets. The study was guided by agenda-setting and framing theories. The study's findings show a stark difference between the two media outlets. British Broadcasting Corporation Amharic portrayed the strike as a rights-based protest rooted in socioeconomic conditions. In contrast, the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation framed it as disruptive and immoral, citing professional responsibility and government responsiveness. The two media outlets built the strike differently in their coverage. The Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation primarily represented government accounts but excluded the voices of health professionals. On the other hand, the British Broadcasting Corporation incorporated the voices of health workers and association leaders. The findings indicate that the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation framed the protest through human-interest and rights-based narratives, amplifying workers' voices and legitimizing grievances. Moreover, the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation emphasized professional duty, national unity, and government responsiveness, silencing dissent. These divergent frames reflect media ownership, editorial independence, and political context in shaping public perception and policy discourse. The study contributes to understanding media power in politically controversial contexts and underscores the significance of pluralistic narratives in public health crises.

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Introduction

In recent years, Ethiopian public servants have faced mounting economic adversity, largely driven by persistently low wages and the rising cost of living associated with inflation. Reports indicate that inflation has reached nearly 35 percent, while annual wage increments remain at only 4 percent, leaving government employees unable to afford necessities such as food, housing, and transport (African Liberty, 2025; Balderas for Democracy, 2025). Even recent civil service salary adjustments, which raised entry-level pay from 6,940 birr to 11,500 birr, have failed to improve living standards, as inflation continues to erode purchasing power (Addis Fortune, 2024). Health professionals have been disproportionately affected, struggling with inadequate salaries, the absence of meaningful work benefits, and the compounding effects of inflation on their social and personal well-being (World Health Organization, WHO, 2023). Health professionals play a crucial role in society, and addressing their concerns can have a significant impact on the overall well-being of the population. By focusing on the challenges faced by health professionals, such as inadequate salaries and a lack of resources, the government can improve healthcare services and ultimately benefit the entire nation.

In response, health professionals nationwide organized a synchronized strike in May 2025, halting non-emergency services and demanding government intervention (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, ACLED, 2025). The Ethiopian Health Professionals Movement (EHPM) spearheaded these actions, citing grievances over wages, health insurance, housing, and professional dignity. Human Rights Watch (2025a, 2025b) documented that the government responded with intimidation, arrests, and suspension of professional associations rather than addressing the underlying concerns. This highlights the precarious position of health workers, who remain essential to the functioning of the healthcare system yet face systemic neglect.

The way such events are communicated to the public plays a decisive role in shaping perceptions and influencing political responses. Media outlets act as gatekeepers of information, determining whether to frame a strike as a legitimate rights-based protest, a disruptive crisis, or a routine labor dispute. As Huang (2009) notes, the language and framing choices employed by newspapers and broadcasters can significantly affect public opinion, political discourse, and even the reactions of international observers. In the Ethiopian context, the recent health workers' strike illustrates this dynamic. Coverage of the walkout not only informs citizens' understanding of the protest but also influences how government leaders and international agencies interpret its legitimacy and urgency, thereby shaping subsequent policy decisions.

This paper, therefore, examines how the Ethiopian health workers' strike has been represented by two distinct media outlets: the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Amharic and the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC). EBC, as the primary state broadcaster, provides access to domestic discourse and reflects the government's official narrative. In contrast, BBC Amharic, an international public broadcasting service, offers Ethiopian stories in Amharic while simultaneously projecting a global journalistic perspective. The inclusion of both outlets allows for a comparative analysis that highlights differences in editorial independence, ownership structures, and ideological orientations. Importantly, both broadcasters operate in the same language, making their content particularly relevant for comparative study since they target similar audiences but diverge in their framing strategies.

The analysis focuses on how each outlet constructs the strike through tone, thematic emphasis, and voice representation. Attention is given to which voices are amplified—such as government officials or health professionals, and which are marginalized or excluded. By interrogating the underlying messages embedded in each outlet's reporting, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how media framing influences public discourse on labor rights, health sector challenges, and political accountability in Ethiopia. Ultimately, this comparison underscores the broader significance of media power in politically contested contexts and highlights the need for pluralistic narratives in shaping public health debates and labor struggles.

1.1. Background of the 2025 health professionals' strike

According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) report on the Ethiopian Peace Observatory, the Ethiopian health professionals' strike began in the first week of March 2025 to protest unpaid salaries for 17 months during the war in Tigray (ACLED, 2025). The strike was not only about salary arrears but also reflected broader grievances, including lack of overtime compensation, absence of professional benefits, and persistently low monthly wages. These conditions highlight the structural challenges facing Ethiopia's health sector, which has been severely strained by conflict, economic instability, and weak institutional support (World Health Organization, 2023; Tessema et al., 2021).

The ACLED report further indicates that the Ethiopian Medical Association documented cases where medical doctors who demanded salary increases faced imprisonment in certain regions and zones (ACLED, 2025). This underscores the precarious position of health professionals, who are simultaneously essential to public welfare yet vulnerable to political repression.

Such punitive measures reflect broader patterns in Ethiopia where professional associations, including those in health and education, have historically struggled to assert autonomy under state pressure (Abbink, 2011; Lefort, 2020).

In response to these grievances, the Ethiopian Health Professionals Association submitted an official letter to the government, setting a one-month deadline for action. When the Ministry of Health failed to respond, the strike was officially launched in March 2025 (ACLED, 2025). The silence of the government illustrates a breakdown in institutional dialogue and accountability, raising questions about governance and the prioritization of health sector needs during post-conflict recovery (Aalen & Tronvoll, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

The nationwide scope of the strike, which directly concerns life-and-death issues for citizens, makes it a critical case for examining how media organizations frame labor disputes in essential services. Media framing theory suggests that the way issues are presented influences public perception and policy responses (Entman, 1993; McCombs, 2014). In Ethiopia, where media freedom has been contested and uneven, the framing of such strikes can either amplify professional voices or delegitimize them depending on political alignment (Skjerdal, 2011; Gagliardone, 2014).

This study, therefore, examines how two media organizations frame the Ethiopian health professionals' strike. By analyzing their coverage, the study seeks to understand whether the media portrays the strike as a legitimate demand for rights and welfare, or as a destabilizing act against state authority. Such analysis is crucial because media framing not only shapes public opinion but also influences government responses and international perceptions (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

1.2. Purpose of the study

The two media outlets have different orientations: the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is a global media outlet, whereas the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) is Ethiopia's state-owned national broadcaster, closely tied to the government, as it is financed and owned by the government. On the other hand, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) differs in orientation, as it has a wide reach and greater editorial independence to cover international issues. This contrast enables a comparative analysis of how the same event is portrayed by two media outlets. Although the two media differ in their orientation, the sampled content is written in the same Amharic language and addressed to the same target audience.

Regarding the selected case, the Ethiopian health professionals' strike remains ongoing and is a current issue. It enables examination of how the media currently portrays the event and contrasts these portrayals with theories and concepts. Consequently, the chosen case is important because it clarifies how two distinct media outlets portray the same event.

This comparison shows how each organization's editorial position and audience engagement differ with respect to narrative framing, tone, and focus.

1.3. Research questions
The study has the following research questions:
RQ1: How do BBC Amharic and EBC frame the Ethiopian health professionals' strike?
RQ2: Whose voices are amplified or silenced in each media outlet's coverage?
RQ3: What is the underlying message of each media outlet's report?

2. Theoretical frameworks
This study primarily draws on agenda-setting and framing theories to analyze how media organizations shape public perceptions of the Ethiopian health professionals' strike.

2.1. Agenda-Setting Theory
The origins of agenda-setting theory can be traced back to Walter Lippmann's seminal work *Public Opinion* (1922), in which he argued that "the media is a principal connection between the events in the real world and the images in the minds of the public." Lippmann's insights laid the foundation for understanding how media mediate reality. Later, McCombs and Shaw (1972) formally developed agenda-setting theory through their study of the 1968 U.S. presidential election, demonstrating that the media's repeated emphasis on certain issues influenced what the public perceived as important.

Agenda-setting theory posits that by repeatedly covering specific issues, the media elevate those issues to the public agenda, shaping perceptions of salience (Asemah et al., 2022). Griffin (2019) explains that the central assumption of agenda-setting is that "the media don't tell us what to think, but they do tell us what to think about." Over time, sustained coverage can influence attitudes and policy priorities (McCombs, 2004). Scholars such as Rogers and Dearing (1988) further expanded the theory by examining intermedia agenda-setting, where elite media influence the agendas of other outlets.

2.2. Framing Theory

While agenda-setting focuses on issue salience, framing theory emphasizes how issues are presented. Entman (1993) defines framing as the process of selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in communication, thereby promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. Farming thus guides audiences in interpreting events from specific perspectives.

Tuckman (1978) highlights that framing reflects organizational routines, professional ideologies, and institutional pressures that shape journalistic practices. Gitlin (1980) adds that framing often reinforces dominant power structures, marginalizing alternative voices, particularly in contexts where media are subject to state influence. Cissel (2012) notes that framing is not merely descriptive but interpretive, embedding subjective evaluations within news narratives. Framing theory is particularly relevant in analyzing health-related strikes, where media can either amplify healthcare workers' rights or delegitimize their actions by portraying them as irresponsible (Mechlinski & Horn, 2011). In this paper, framing theory is applied to examine how BBC Amharic and EBC constructed narratives around the strike, focusing on the content of reports, speaker types, and quotation frequency to reveal patterns of amplification, silencing, and ideological positioning.

2.3. Literature review

Media framing plays a significant role in shaping public opinion, particularly during protests, strikes, or conflicts in which multiple narratives compete. Entman (1993) defines framing as the selection and amplification of aspects of perceived reality to highlight a particular issue. Tuckman (1978) emphasizes that framing reflects organizational routines, professional ideologies, and institutional pressures that shape how journalists present information. Gitlin (1980) further argues that framing reinforces dominant power structures and marginalizes alternative voices, particularly in contexts where the media are subject to state influence.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, state-owned media often act as extensions of government narratives. Nyamnjoh (2005) explains that government control of media in Africa continues to constrain journalistic autonomy. In Ethiopia, where the media environment is tightly regulated, government influence is particularly pronounced. Skjerdal (2012) highlights that Ethiopian state media serve as instruments of government communication, while private and international media provide limited but important alternative narratives. More recently,

Skjerdal and Desta (2021) note that Ethiopia's media reforms have not fully dismantled state dominance, leaving journalists vulnerable to political pressures.

Farming of health-related stories is especially sensitive. Mechlinski and Horn (2011) demonstrate that health news framing significantly influences public trust in both healthcare providers and policymakers. During strikes, framing can either amplify healthcare workers' rights or delegitimize their actions by portraying them as irresponsible. Existing studies in Ethiopia have primarily examined media freedom and press regulation (Skjerdal, 2012; Skjerdal & Desta, 2021), but few have focused on how state and international media frame labor strikes in the healthcare sector. This study addresses that empirical gap by comparing the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) and BBC Amharic's coverage of the Ethiopian health professionals' strike.

Strikes by doctors and other healthcare staff have become a major challenge in Sub-Saharan Africa. Manguele et al. (2024) show that such strikes have significant adverse effects on health service provision and patient outcomes across the continent. Their findings suggest that strikes, often initiated by demands for higher pay and better working conditions, can exacerbate inequities in access to care, particularly for vulnerable populations. In Ethiopia, Merga and Fufa (2019) found that only 38.5% of health professionals were satisfied with their jobs, citing poor work environments, inadequate benefits, and limited professional allowances as key factors influencing dissatisfaction.

The relationship between distrust in the healthcare system, violence against health workers, and public perception has also been examined in recent studies. Kızılkaya and Buğdali (2025) found that negative perceptions of the healthcare system and violence against health workers are closely linked to the way health news mediates these perceptions. Their study underscores the role of media framing in shaping public attitudes toward healthcare professionals, sometimes exacerbating hostility when coverage is biased.

Journalists face multiple challenges in framing health stories, including tight deadlines, limited medical expertise, and the need to balance newsworthiness with accuracy. Leask et al. (2010) argue that power dynamics and media ownership largely determine which health issues receive coverage, how they are framed, and whose perspectives are represented. This has substantial implications for public opinion and health policy, as the dissemination of health messages through the media influences both societal priorities and policy agendas.

Recent studies on media ownership further demonstrate its impact on framing. Gever et al. (2018) reported that media ownership shapes the selection of sources, frames, and slants in coverage. In contexts where press freedom is

limited, ownership and journalists' affiliations strongly influence framing choices. Kiwanuka-Tondo et al. (2012) found that private newspapers employed more diverse and critical frames, while government-owned outlets relied on "solutions" frames that minimized dissent. These findings highlight the importance of ownership structures in shaping how strikes and health-related issues are represented in the media.

3. Methodology

This study employed qualitative content analysis to examine how the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Amharic and the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) framed the Ethiopian health professionals' strike (Table 1). The analysis included systematic coding of speaker types and quotation frequency to assess whether voices were amplified, silenced, or afforded equal representation. Content analysis is widely recognized as a method for systematically examining textual data to identify recurring patterns, themes, and framing devices (Wright, 2017). It is particularly useful in media studies for uncovering how narratives are constructed and how power relations are reflected in coverage (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017).

A total of forty-five news stories were selected from the digital archives of both media organizations: twenty-three from BBC Amharic and twenty-two from EBC. Selection was based on two main criteria. First, the stories had to be published between March 20, 2025, and May 20, 2025, a period determined by the official start of the strike and the peak of public debate surrounding it. Second, only articles that directly discussed the strike were included. This time frame served as the primary inclusion criterion, ensuring that the sample captured the most relevant and contemporaneous coverage of the event.

The selected stories were purposefully sampled and coded according to seven main framing categories derived from established framing literature and the data collected from EBC and BBC (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999).

3.1. Human-Interest Frames

Human-interest frames emphasize the lived experiences and personal narratives of those directly affected by the strike (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Leask et al., 2010). In the context of Ethiopian health professionals, this frame highlights the struggles of individual doctors, nurses, and support staff who face economic hardship due to low wages, inflation, and the absence of benefits. By focusing on personal testimonies—such as a nurse unable to afford rent or a physician describing the emotional toll of working without adequate compensation—media outlets humanize the strike and make it relatable to the

public. This framing strategy appeals to empathy, drawing attention to the human cost of systemic neglect. While it mobilizes sympathy and public support, it can also risk oversimplifying structural issues by reducing them to individual suffering rather than broader institutional failures (Kalu, 2021; Leask et al., 2010).

3.2. Rights and Accountability Frames

Rights and accountability frames situate the strike within the broader discourse of constitutional guarantees, labor rights, and government responsibility. Coverage that adopts this frame portrays the strike as a legitimate exercise of freedom of association and protest, emphasizing that health professionals are not merely employees, but citizens entitled to fair treatment and dignity. By invoking constitutional provisions or international labor conventions, this frame pressures the government to act, framing inaction as a violation of rights. It also resonates strongly with international observers and advocacy groups, who monitor rights-based narratives in politically sensitive contexts. Ultimately, this frame elevates the strike from a workplace dispute to a matter of justice, governance, and accountability, underscoring the state's obligation to protect and uphold the rights of its workforce.

3.3. Professional Duty Frames

Professional duty frames emphasize the ethical obligations and responsibilities of health workers, often casting the strike in moral terms. Media adopting this frame may portray striking health professionals as neglecting their duty to patients, framing the protest as irresponsible or harmful to public welfare. Alternatively, some outlets may argue that protesting is itself part of professional duty—defending the dignity of the profession and ensuring sustainable working conditions for future service delivery. This frame highlights the tension between patient care and labor rights, positioning health workers at the intersection of ethical responsibility and political activism. Analytically, professional duty frames can delegitimize strikes by portraying them as immoral, or conversely, legitimize them by showing that ethical duty includes advocating for fair treatment and systemic reform.

3.4. National Unity Frames

National unity frames stress collective responsibility, social stability, and cohesion, situating the strike within the broader narrative of national interest. In Ethiopia's politically fragile context, media may argue that strikes threaten unity and stability, portraying them as divisive actions that undermine social harmony.

Alternatively, some coverage may frame the strike as part of a collective struggle for justice, emphasizing solidarity among workers and citizens in the pursuit of equitable governance. This frame often invokes patriotism, social cohesion, and the dangers of fragmentation, linking labor disputes to the broader project of nation-building. Analytically, national unity frames reveal how labor actions are interpreted not only as workplace disputes but also as challenges to political stability and collective identity.

3.5. Government Responsiveness Frames

Government responsiveness frames portray state actions as solutions to grievances, emphasizing reforms, negotiations, or interventions. Media adopting this frame highlight salary adjustments, policy reforms, or government dialogue with unions as evidence of responsiveness, reinforcing the legitimacy of state authority. Alternatively, when responsiveness is absent, coverage may frame the government as negligent or authoritarian, exposing weaknesses in governance. This frame is particularly powerful in shaping public opinion, as it positions the state either as a proactive problem-solver or as a barrier to justice. Analytically, government responsiveness frames demonstrate how media narratives can either pacify public anger by showing that grievances are being addressed or amplify criticism by exposing state failures.

Thus, this coding framework allowed for systematic comparison of how BBC and EBC constructed narratives around the strike, and how voice representation differed across outlets. By focusing on speaker types and quotation frequency, the study assessed whether health professionals, government officials, or international actors were given prominence, thereby revealing patterns of amplification or silencing consistent with agenda-setting and framing theories (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Skjerdal, 2012).

Table 1

Methodology Overview

Section	Description	Key Details
Approach	Qualitative content analysis	Examined BBC Amharic and EBC coverage of Ethiopian health professionals' strike; systematic coding of speaker types and quotation frequency.
Rationale	Content analysis as method	Identifies recurring patterns, themes, and framing devices; useful in media studies for uncovering narratives and power relations (Wright, 2017; Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017).
Sample Size	45 news stories	23 from BBC Amharic; 22 from EBC.
Selection Criteria	Inclusion rules	- Published between March 20, 2025, and May 20, 2025 (strike period). - Directly discussed the strike.
Coding Framework	Derived from framing literature	Seven main categories (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999).
Frame 1: Human-Interest	Lived experiences & personal narratives	Highlights struggles of doctors, nurses, staff; appeals to empathy; risks oversimplifying structural issues.
Frame 2: Rights & Accountability	Constitutional & labor rights	Strike framed as legitimate protest; pressures government; elevates issue to justice and governance.
Frame 3: Professional Duty	Ethical obligations of health workers	Tension between patient care and labor rights can delegitimize or legitimize a strike depending on the portrayal.
Frame 4: National Unity	Collective responsibility & stability	Strike framed as divisive or as a collective struggle; invokes patriotism and cohesion.
Frame 5: Government Responsiveness	State actions & reforms	Highlights salary adjustments, negotiations, or negligence; positions the government as proactive or authoritarian.
Analytical Focus	Voice representation	Comparison of amplification/silencing of health professionals, government officials, and international actors.
Theoretical Lens	Agenda-setting & framing theories	McCombs & Shaw (1972); Skjerdal (2012).

4. Findings of the study

Human-interest framing is one of the most powerful journalistic strategies for shaping public understanding of social disputes. By foregrounding personal narratives, media outlets transform abstract issues into relatable human experiences that evoke empathy and emotional engagement. In the context of the

Ethiopian health professionals' strike, this frame became a critical site of divergence between BBC Amharic and the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC). BBC Amharic relied on lived experiences and testimonies to humanize the strike, while EBC largely avoided such accounts, privileging official statements. This contrast illustrates how framing choices influence audience perceptions of legitimacy and justice.

4.1. Human-Interest Frames

BBC Amharic employed human-interest frames to foreground the lived experiences of health professionals, portraying the strike sympathetically and in an investigative manner. Its coverage highlighted personal stories of poverty, family struggles, and the emotional toll of inflation, sitting down the strike as a matter of survival and dignity. For example, one report quoted a health worker: "To be honest, it has been a year since I started skipping breakfast. I try to convince myself that fasting is spiritual. I eat twice a day. I have had to make numerous adjustments. I live my life by a miracle" (BBC report, cited in study). Such narratives humanized the strike, making it relatable to citizens and aligning with Entman's (1993) framing theory, which explains how media emphasize specific aspects of reality to produce interpretations. This approach resonates with Cissel's (2012) findings that alternative and independent outlets often foreground personal narratives to challenge dominant frames. In contrast, EBC largely avoided personal testimonies, focusing instead on official statements, thereby minimizing empathy for health workers and reducing the strike to an abstract disruption.

4.2. Rights and Accountability Frames

The BBC also adopted rights and accountability frames, emphasizing constitutional guarantees and holding the government accountable for unresolved grievances. Its reports explicitly referenced Ethiopia's constitution, noting that certain classes of workers have the right to strike and express grievances. BBC further incorporated perspectives from international watchdogs such as Amnesty International, reinforcing the legitimacy of the strike as a human rights issue (McInnes et al., 2012). This framing elevated the protest from a workplace dispute to a matter of justice and governance. Previous studies, such as Huang (2009), demonstrate that diverse framing increases audience perception of legitimacy, while Gagliardone (2014) highlights how international media often situate Ethiopian labor disputes within broader governance challenges. EBC, however, downplayed rights-based narratives, portraying the strike as irresponsible and unethical. By excluding references to

constitutional rights, EBC reinforced state authority and avoided framing the strike as legitimate resistance.

4.3. Professional Duty Frames

EBC consistently employed professional duty frames, emphasizing the ethical obligations of health workers to serve patients regardless of economic hardship. Its coverage included statements such as: *"Abandoning children, mothers, and patients injured in emergencies is unethical"* (Dr.Tegen Bashe, EBC report). This framing delegitimized the strike by portraying it as harmful to public welfare. BBC inverted this frame, suggesting that striking was itself part of professional duty—defending the dignity of the profession and ensuring sustainable healthcare delivery. This divergence illustrates how professional identity was contested in media narratives, reflecting Kiwanuka-Tondo's (2012) findings that government-owned media often adopt defensive frames to suppress dissent. Similarly, Kızılkaya and Buğdali (2025) show that biased coverage of health disputes can exacerbate negative perceptions of professionals, discouraging public support.

4.4. National Unity Frames

EBC invoked national unity frames, stressing that strikes threatened stability and collective responsibility. Headlines such as *"It is absolutely unacceptable to interrupt health services"* (State Minister, EBC report) reinforced narratives of duty and stability. This framing linked the strike to risks of fragmentation and instability, portraying it as divisive in Ethiopia's fragile political environment. BBC, however, framed the strike as part of a collective struggle for justice, emphasizing solidarity among health workers and citizens. By doing so, BBC tied the protest to broader narratives of socioeconomic fairness, while EBC tied it to risks of destabilization. This divergence reflects Skjerdal's (2012) observation that African state-owned media often prioritize stability and unity over dissent, while independent outlets highlight pluralism and contestation.

4.5. Government Responsiveness Frames

EBC emphasized government responsiveness, portraying salary adjustments and official statements as evidence that the state was addressing grievances. This frame reinforced government legitimacy and positioned the state as the ultimate problem-solver. BBC, in contrast, highlighted the inadequacy of government measures, stressing that health workers' voices were excluded from official discourse. By framing the government as unresponsive,

the BBC amplified criticism and underscored systemic neglect. This divergence reflects McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda-setting theory, which shows how repeated emphasis on government action or inaction shapes public salience. It also aligns with Leask et al. (2010) findings that editorial independence allows media to amplify marginalized voices, while government-owned outlets normalize state narratives.

4.6. Voice Representation

Voice representation differed significantly across outlets. BBC amplified the voices of health professionals by foregrounding their narratives of poverty, dissatisfaction, and family struggles. Leaders of professional associations were repeatedly quoted, alongside international actors such as Amnesty International. This reflects Leask et al.'s (2010) findings that independent media amplify marginalized voices and frame issues as matters of public concern. EBC, however, amplified state actors and pro-government professionals. Ministry of Health officials, regional bureau heads, and hospital directors dominated coverage, while striking professionals and association leaders were absent. This silencing of dissenting voices reflects Gever et al. (2018) observation that government-owned outlets often minimize opposition frames. The disparity in sourcing illustrates agenda-setting dynamics: BBC's repeated emphasis on health professionals' voices elevated the strike's salience, while EBC's exclusion normalized government responses (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

4.7. Underlying Messages and Ideological Positions

The BBC's underlying message advocated for rights and accountability, framing the strike as constitutionally protected resistance. This aligns with Griffin's (2019) argument that agenda-setting can shape public attitudes by legitimizing collective action. EBC's underlying message emphasized professional duty and national responsibility, portraying the strike as unacceptable and unethical. Its coverage reinforced state narratives of duty and stability, delegitimizing collective action. Ultimately, the BBC's framing mobilized advocacy and accountability, while EBC's framing preserved institutional stability and suppressed dissent (Figure 1). This divergence illustrates Entman's (1993) framing components—problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation—applied differently to advance distinct institutional agendas.

Figure 1

Contrasts how BBC Amharic legitimized the strike while EBC delegitimized it

	BBC Amharic (Legitimizing)	EBC (Delegitimizing)
Human-Interest	Personal stories evoke empathy Strike = survival & dignity	Avoids personal stories Focus on official statements
Rights & Accountability	Emphasizes rights & justice Cites constitution & watchdogs	Omits rights discourse Strike = irresponsible
Professional Duty	Strike = ethical duty to defend profession	Strike = unethical Abandoning patients
National Unity	Strike = collective struggle for fairness	Strike = threat to unity & stability
Government Responsiveness	Gov't unresponsive Amplifies systemic neglect	Gov't responsive Highlights reforms & dialogue

Table 2
Findings of the Study

Framing Category	BBC Amharic	EBC	Analytical Insight
Human-Interest Frames	Emphasized lived experiences, poverty, family struggles, emotional toll; investigative and empathetic tone.	Avoided personal testimonies; relied on official statements; minimized empathy.	BBC humanized the strike, EBC abstracted it, shaping perceptions of legitimacy differently.
Rights & Accountability Frames	Highlighted constitutional rights, labor freedoms, and international watchdogs (e.g., Amnesty International).	Downplayed rights; framed strike as irresponsible and unethical; reinforced state authority.	BBC elevated the strike to a justice/governance issue; EBC suppressed rights-based legitimacy.
Professional Duty Frames	Framed striking as part of professional duty—defending dignity and sustainable healthcare.	Cast strike as unethical abandonment of patients; emphasized duty to serve despite hardship.	BBC legitimized the strike via professional ethics; EBC delegitimized it as harmful.
National Unity Frames	Framed as a collective struggle for justice and solidarity among workers/citizens.	Framed strike as divisive, destabilizing, and threatening fragile national unity.	BBC tied the strike to fairness; EBC tied it to risks of fragmentation.
Government Responsiveness Frames	Highlighted the inadequacy of government measures; framed the state as unresponsive and negligent.	Emphasized salary adjustments and official statements; portrayed government as a proactive problem-solver.	BBC amplified criticism; EBC reinforced government legitimacy.
Voice Representation	Amplified health professionals, association leaders, and international actors; foregrounded marginalized voices.	Amplified state officials, pro-government professionals, silenced striking workers.	BBC elevated dissenting voices; EBC normalized state narratives.
Underlying Messages & Ideological Positions	Advocated rights, accountability, and constitutional resistance; mobilized advocacy.	Emphasized duty, stability, and national responsibility; delegitimized collective action.	BBC promoted justice and accountability; EBC preserved institutional stability and suppressed dissent.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the two media organizations—BBC and EBC—portrayed the Ethiopian health professionals' strike in markedly different ways (Table 2). This divergence illustrates how

agenda-setting and framing theories operate in practice across media systems. As Entman (1993) explains, framing involves selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of reality to promote a particular interpretation. In the BBC's coverage, the strike was framed as a legitimate response to systemic challenges faced by health professionals, including economic precarity and poor working conditions. By foregrounding personal narratives and incorporating perspectives from international organizations such as Amnesty International, the BBC contextualized the strike within broader human rights and constitutional frameworks, thereby legitimizing the grievances of health professionals (McInnes et al., 2012; Merga & Fufa, 2019).

This approach reflects the role of editorial independence in shaping coverage. Leask et al. (2010) argue that media ownership and independence significantly influence how health-related issues are framed. The BBC's investigative orientation allowed it to amplify the voices of health professionals, aligning with agenda-setting theory as articulated by McCombs and Shaw (1972): sustained coverage elevates an issue's salience in public discourse. Similarly, Griffin (2019) emphasizes that agenda-setting functions can shape public attitudes over time, with repeated exposure to rights-based narratives fostering advocacy and mobilization.

In contrast, the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) framed the strike as unethical and detrimental to public health. This aligns with findings by Gever et al. (2018) and Kiwanuka-Tondo et al. (2012), who note that government-owned media often employ defensive frames that minimize dissent and prioritize state stability. EBC's emphasis on professional duty and the negative consequences of the strike reflects state-aligned framing strategies, which suppress alternative perspectives and reinforce official narratives (Skjerdal, 2012). Such framing choices illustrate how media ownership and state influence shape coverage, privileging government voices while marginalizing health professionals.

The disparity in voice representation further underscores the agenda-setting function. BBC coverage highlighted individual testimonies and collective associations, while EBC silenced these voices in favor of government officials. This sourcing imbalance resonates with Kızılkaya and Buğdali's (2025) findings that biased coverage can exacerbate negative public perceptions of health workers, sometimes even fueling hostility toward them. Moreover, Manguele et al. (2024) show that strikes across sub-Saharan Africa are often politicized, with media narratives influencing both public sentiment and policy responses.

Ultimately, the divergent frames of BBC and EBC reflect broader structural issues of media ownership, editorial independence, and state alignment

within Ethiopia's media system. BBC's international affiliation enabled a rights-based framing, while EBC's state ownership reinforced narratives of duty and stability. This duality exemplifies Entman's (1993) framing components—problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation—applied differently to advance distinct institutional agendas. The implications are significant: BBC's framing may mobilize public support and advocacy, whereas EBC's framing may normalize government responses and discourage collective action.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how BBC Amharic and the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) represented the Ethiopian health professionals' strike, drawing on agenda-setting and framing theories. The findings revealed a clear contrast between the two media outlets. BBC Amharic framed the strike as a justified, rights-based action, amplifying the voices of health professionals and situating their grievances within constitutional and human rights discourses. In contrast, EBC framed the strike as unethical and disruptive, emphasizing government perspectives while silencing the voices of striking professionals. These differences reflect broader dynamics of media ownership, editorial independence, and ideological orientation in Ethiopia.

The comparative analysis underscores the importance of media framing and agenda-setting in shaping public perceptions of labor disputes. BBC Amharic portrayed the strike as a lawful, rights-based movement motivated by unresolved socioeconomic problems, thereby legitimizing collective action. EBC, however, portrayed the strike as an irresponsible disturbance, stressing professional duty and government responsiveness. This divergence illustrates how framing choices not only define the problem but also influence causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and recommended solutions, consistent with Entman's (1993) framing model.

The findings highlight how media ownership structures, levels of editorial freedom, and the broader political context influence journalistic practices in Ethiopia. State-owned outlets such as EBC tend to prioritize stability and government legitimacy, while international outlets like BBC Amharic emphasize accountability and pluralism. This dynamic demonstrates the critical role of independent media in amplifying marginalized voices and fostering democratic discourse.

Finally, the study emphasizes the need for more pluralistic media environments that fairly depict multiple perspectives during workplace disputes. Future research should expand the scope by examining additional strikes,

incorporating interviews with journalists and policymakers, and extending comparative analysis to other African countries. Such work would help generalize the findings and deepen understanding of how media framing and agenda-setting shape labor rights, governance, and public opinion across diverse political contexts.

7. Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the scope of analysis was limited to two media organizations: BBC Amharic and the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC). While this comparison provides valuable insights into contrasting frames, it does not capture the full spectrum of media perspectives within Ethiopia or internationally. Other outlets may have employed different strategies, and thus, the findings cannot be generalized beyond the two cases examined.

Second, the study was confined to a specific temporal window surrounding the health professionals' strike. Media narratives are dynamic and evolve, meaning that subsequent coverage could have introduced new frames or altered the emphasis placed on certain aspects of the strike. This temporal limitation reduces the ability to assess long-term framing trends or shifts in agenda-setting functions.

Third, issues of language and translation present another constraint. BBC Amharic and EBC operate in distinct linguistic and cultural contexts, and subtle differences in idiomatic usage, editorial style, or translation choices may have influenced how frames were interpreted and coded. These nuances may affect the comparability of the two outlets' coverage.

Fourth, the study relied primarily on textual analysis of published media reports without incorporating interviews with journalists, editors, or policymakers. As a result, the motivations, constraints, and editorial decisions behind framing choices remain unexplored. Including such perspectives could have provided a richer understanding of the institutional and professional dynamics shaping coverage.

Fifth, as with all qualitative media analysis, researcher bias is an inherent limitation. Although theoretical frameworks such as Entman's (1993) model guided the coding and interpretation, complete objectivity cannot be guaranteed. The researcher's positionality and interpretive lens may have influenced the identification of frames and agenda-setting functions.

Finally, the Ethiopian socio-political environment is highly specific, particularly in relation to media ownership and state influence. Findings from this case study may not be directly transferable to other national contexts

without careful consideration of local media systems and political structures. Moreover, the study did not examine audience reception, leaving unanswered questions about how the public interpreted or responded to the frames presented. Without empirical evidence of audience perceptions, conclusions about the impact of agenda-setting and framing remain inferential.

8. Future Research Directions

Building on these limitations, future research should broaden the scope of analysis to include additional media outlets, both domestic and international, to capture a more diverse range of framing strategies. Expanding the sample would allow for stronger generalizations and reveal whether the patterns observed between BBC Amharic and EBC are consistent across other media systems. Longitudinal studies that track coverage over extended periods would also be valuable, as they could illuminate how frames evolve in response to shifting political contexts, public sentiment, or policy interventions.

Further inquiry should incorporate interviews with journalists, editors, and policymakers to better understand the institutional and professional dynamics that shape framing choices. Such perspectives would provide insight into the constraints and motivations behind editorial decisions, complementing textual analysis with firsthand accounts. Comparative studies across different African countries could also deepen understanding of how media ownership structures and political environments influence coverage of labor disputes, thereby situating Ethiopia's case within broader regional trends.

Finally, future research should examine audience reception to assess how media frames are interpreted and acted upon by the public. Surveys, focus groups, or ethnographic approaches could reveal whether rights-based narratives foster advocacy and mobilization, or whether state-aligned frames succeed in discouraging collective action. By integrating content analysis with audience studies, researchers can more fully capture the interplay between media framing, public opinion, and policy outcomes. Such work would contribute to a richer understanding of the role of media in shaping labor rights, governance, and democratic discourse across diverse political contexts.

Declarations

Ethical approval

The study was conducted according to the Helsinki Declaration.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Data availability

The data will be available from the author on reasonable request.

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