Research Article   **Open Access**

Independence in the shadow of power: A phenomenological inquiry of Public Service Broadcasting management in Ethiopia

Mebrate Haile Gebremedhin[1] (iD) **Getachew Dinku Godana**[2] (iD)

[1,2] School of Media and Communication, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Abstract

This phenomenological inquiry aimed at exploring how Public Service Broadcasting managers and journalists in Ethiopia experience and interpret independence in their daily professional practice where enduring political control, financial dependency, and institutional subservience intersect to undermine journalistic autonomy. The study covers the past three decades, with particular emphasis on the final six years of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front regime and the six years following its dissolution. The lived experiences of nine research participants representing managers and editors-in-chief from broadcasters claiming to serve public interest were purposively selected for in-depth interviews. The findings reveal that intertwined political, financial, and legal entanglements have normalized institutional conformity within public broadcaster, undermining professional autonomy and transforming the broadcaster as an extension of incumbent political interests rather than a watchdog for the public. The researchers recommend that a democratic culture grounded in accountability, transparency, and provision of quality public service be fostered within the Public Service Broadcasting in Ethiopia. We suggest that the broadcasting should enhance their editorial independence and maintain institutional autonomy by depoliticizing governance, diversifying funding sources, and getting public support in terms of enforcing legal and policy safeguards.

Citation: Mebrate Haile Gebremedhin, Getachew Dinku Godana. (2026). Independence in the shadow of power: A phenomenological inquiry of Public Service Broadcasting management in Ethiopia, *EJLCC.11* (1).47-69.DOI 10.20372/ejlcc.v11i1.3131

Introduction

The beginning of modern press work in Ethiopia is traced back to 1863, while radio broadcasting was launched in 1935 (Meseret, 2013; Skjerdal, 2012). On the other hand, television was first introduced to the Ethiopian people in 1955 by the BBC and then the country launched its own television when Ethiopian Television started service in 1964 (Abdissa & Getachew, 2024). Following the end of the Italian invasion and brief occupation in Ethiopia, the radio as well as the print media served as a tool of publicizing and solidifying Emperor Haile Silassie's reign (Stremlau, 2008).

During Emperor Haile Silassie, censorship was and freedom of reporting was not as such guaranteed. Until six months to its downfall, freedom of the press and of expression, and the lifting of censorship was among the serious bones of contention of the student movement with the Imperial Government (Daniel, 2019; Meseret, 2013; Stremlau, 2008). The 1955 Ethiopian Constitution, nonetheless, states that freedom of speech and of the press is guaranteed throughout the Empire and correspondence shall be subject to no censorship except in time of declared national emergency (Articles 41 & 42, 1955).

Following the demise of the Monarchy, the Ethiopian politics witnessed a change of three governments in the period spanning from 1974 and 2019. A group of military officers led a revolutionary movement which later culminated in the formation of the Military Government (the Dergue) in 1974. For a year or so the Dergue period witnessed an open media environment though a more serious repression than was during the Emperor surfaced as of 1975, both on local media and foreign correspondents (Abdissa & Getachew, 2024; Skjerdal, 2012). The Military Government enacted a constitution 13 years after its power grab and four years before its downfall. The Constitution, titled "the Constitution of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia", guaranteed freedom of speech and the press (Ethiopian Constitution, Art 47, 1987). Despite the Constitutional safeguard of freedom of speech and of the press, the practices were often inconsistent with the provisions. The government instituted a censorship department and as a result of which self-censorship was rampant (Meseret, 2013).

The year 1991 witnessed dramatic and phenomenal events in Ethiopia and globally. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the cold war era came to an end. And in Ethiopia, the Military Government which controlled power since 1974 was ousted by the guerrilla fighters, formally named the EPRDF. A devout adherent of Marxism-Leninism, EPRDF, has with its ideological rigor ruled Ethiopia until Abiy Ahmed assumed office as Prime Minister on April 2, 2018.The agenda on the right of thought, opinion and expression was one of its

priorities. Therefore, it was trying hard to give itself a democratic cover-up as a form of political facelift. In this regard, the adoption of the Transitional Period Charter of Ethiopia in July 1991 marked a positive step. It declared full respect for freedom of expression, aligning with the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Within a year, the 1992 Press Law formally abolished censorship, leading to a rapid proliferation, with varied life-span, of newspapers and magazines. The Transition Charter paved the way to a new and controversial constitution which guaranteed freedom of expression and of the press and also prohibited any form of censorship. The establishment of regional mass media organizations, the opening of journalism and communication programs in various universities, and the institution of a media regulatory body, etc. were, as Abdissa and Getachew (2024) accounted, among the successes. However, this period was also marked by serious repression, including government censorship of the media, widespread self-censorship, and continued containment of the press law (Musbah & Hailemariam, 2024; Daniel, 2019).

In early 2018, the government undertook a surprising initiative that, inter alia, led to the release of thousands of prisoners. The political transition gave rise to the Prosperity Party in December 2019, thereby heralding the formal culmination of its predecessor (Ethiopia News Agency, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2019). The political transition in April 2018 signaled a watershed for press freedom in Ethiopia as the new administration introduced reforms that allowed the media to operate with an unprecedented degree of openness. Outlets that had been operating from abroad were able to return to the country (UN Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression, 2019); additionally 264 news websites, news outlets and blogs were unblocked (Freedom House Report, 2019), and new national media policy and media proclamation were issued.

However, repressive practices reminiscent of the pre-2018 period began to reassert themselves within the structures and operations of government, accompanied by growing public skepticism on the reforms related to the media sector. Concerns such as censorship, self-censorship, intimidation, and detention have been highlighted by international advocacy groups (CPJ, 2024; Freedom House, 2024). Over the last three decades, both the EPRRD-led government and its successor introduced, by and large, more media laws and policies than their predecessors despite ongoing suppressive practices and a consistent reluctance to effectively enforce these legal frameworks (Mulatu, 2022; Daniel, 2019).

This phenomenological inquiry, therefore, seeks to explore the fundamental attributes that define the independence of PSB in Ethiopia in the past three decades. The study in particular focuses on the Amhara Media Corporation

(AMC), Addis Media Network (AMN), and Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC). In addition, Fana Media Corporation (FMC), although formally categorized as a commercial media outlet, is also included in the study due to its practical ownership propensity and operational similarities with the aforementioned three PSB. The research questions are threefold: *Q1:* How do public service media professionals experience and interpret the influence of political authority in their daily work practices? *Q2:* How does financial dependence shape the editorial and institutional independence of public service broadcasters? *Q3:* To what extent do existing media laws and policy frameworks support or hinder the realization of PSB independence in practice?

Conceptual Framework

Ethiopia's media legislation formally affirms the media's role in enabling public participation and in protecting fundamental constitutional rights, particularly freedom of expression and the right of access to information. A key responsibility of PSB is to enhance public understanding of governance institutions and processes particularly among poor and marginalized communities, by serving as a primary medium for public education and awareness (UNDP, 2004). According to UNESCO (2005), PSB is, "Neither commercial nor State-controlled, public broadcasting's only *raison d'être* is public service. It is the public's broadcasting organization" (p.14). Therefore, at the heart of defining PSB lies the principle of independence from government influence (Abbott, 2016). The following section, therefore, provides a brief overview and major pillars of PSB independence.

The Concept and Practice of Independence in Public Media

In many countries, public service media have encountered persistent difficulties in maintaining meaningful political independence though their attempts to try out various institutional and governance strategies. The autonomy of publicly funded media from governmental and partisan interference is therefore widely regarded as a defining dimension of media independence (Karppinen & Moe, 2016).Abbott (2016) further emphasizes that independence from the government is the central constituent so far as PSB is taken into account. Independence, Hanretty (2011) argues, is inherently relational rather than absolute. Thus, the independence of PSB must be understood in relation to the specific source of power. The "source of power" in the context of this research is political, economic, or institutional.

Independence is not something that public broadcasters can easily embark on. Harding (2015) in this regard states that the struggle for independence is a nonstop one. Public service broadcasters must constantly maintain independence

from politicians and other interest groups in order to report information and criticism freely (Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2005). These authors further argue that when such influence is excreted on the PBS, particularly from the government, the credibility and trustworthiness of the content are likely to be questioned by the audience. Nonetheless, the independence of public service broadcasting is better defended in countries where good governance institutions are properly functioning and the appointment procedures are transparent (Psychogiopoulou et al., 2017).

When discussing the independence of PSB, three critical dimensions emerge: institutional, editorial and financial. Psychogiopoulou et al. (2017) conceptualize editorial independence as the of public broadcasting institutions to determine program content autonomously and without unnecessary external interference and subject only to legal or regulatory limits that aimed at protecting legitimate rights. However, as Buckley et al. (2008) observe, interpreting this principle into practice remains a significant challenge even in contexts where editorial independence is formally recognized and legally protected. In many contexts, such guarantees function largely at a symbolic level since media organizations continue to lack effective institutional autonomy from governmental or other external actors. From a normative perspective, both the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR, 2019) and UNESCO (2008) emphasize that editorial independence in public service broadcasting should be secured through viable laws and policies that facilitate editorial decision-making the right of the public to know in a manner free from any form of interference.

Conversely, the scheme of financial arrangements is central to the operational independence of public service broadcasters. While funding sources such as license fees, advertising revenue, and other commercial incomes are often intended to insulate broadcasters from direct political control, in practice many organizations remain dependent on state mechanisms for revenue collection and distribution (ACE Encyclopedia, 2012). As McQuail (2010) argues that public service broadcasters that rely mainly on public funding can still exercise meaningful editorial and operational autonomy only when funding systems are structured to protect decision-making from political intervention.

Carlos (2009), cited in Smith (2012), adds, one of the key requirements for ensuring independence is that members of the media board shall neither represent nor promote any vested interests, political or otherwise, and must declare their interests in a maintained register to prevent conflicts during their term of appointment. However, Hanretty (2011) warns, the mere power to appoint individuals to the broadcaster's board cannot, on its own, account for the level of the broadcaster's independence, contrary to earlier expectations.

In essence, public service broadcasters are considered independent when they possess editorial, financial, operational and institutional autonomy; free from undue political or commercial influence.

Media Independence: The Ethiopian Case

The 1995 Ethiopian Constitution serves as a hallmark of media independence in Ethiopian. Article 29 Sub-article 4 vividly states; "the press as an institution enjoys legal protection to ensure its operational independence and its capacity to entertain diverse opinions". This provision explicitly affirms the institutional guarantees and protections accorded to the mass media as a whole, thereby ensuring their operational independence. Maintaining operational independence requires that the press, in this case the PSBs, should be able to make their daily editorial and managerial decisions without interference from government officials or political interests. Furthermore, Article 29 Sub-article 5 underscores that the state-funded or state-controlled media should operate in a way that guarantee pluralism, allows diversity of opinions to be expressed, thereby contributing to democratic discourse.

The new Ethiopian media law (Proclamation No. 1238/2021) describes the following concerning PSB:

> Means a radio or television transmission established at National or Regional State level, accountable to the House of Peoples" Representatives or to Regional Councils; wholly or substantially financed by government budget with a mandate to provide contents that guarantee public interest while remaining neutral and independent of government (p. 13, 117).

When discussing the independence of public service broadcasting from commercial pressures and political influence, it encompasses editorial autonomy; safeguards for freedom of expression; exercises adequate, predictable, and independent financing mechanism as well as the independence of governing bodies and transparent procedures for appointing their boards and chief executives (Buckley et al., 2008).

Despite the existence of laws guaranteeing editorial independence, "state" media in Ethiopia continue to experience government interference. A pertinent example in this regard is the disproportionate representation of individuals with political affiliation to the ruling party on media boards, and the broadcasters' reliance on government funding (UNESCO, 2022).

Liberal legislative provisions alone do not guarantee genuine media independence. Smith (2012) in this regard emphasizes that even when public service broadcasters are established under sound legal frameworks, they often struggle to maintain autonomy from government influence. Ayele et al. (2021) also confirm that editorial independence of the PSB in Ethiopia is "eroded".

In this regard, one of the defining features of the post-1991 Ethiopian governments has been reforming the media ecosystem. While these reforms have largely succeeded in expanding media infrastructure, they have failed to uphold the principal mandates of the public media–effectively serving public interest. Existing studies indicate that media reforms are commonly inspired by political agendas and strategies of power consolidation rather than by commitments to the public interest (Mulatu, 2022; Daniel, 2019; Meseret, 2013; Stremlau, 2008). In response, this research focuses on how public service broadcasting managers and journalists understand and negotiates the meaning of independence in their day-to-day professional work under continued institutional, editorial, financial, and political pressures.

Methods

The research aimed to investigate the lived experiences of individuals actively engaged in the sphere of public broadcasting, with particular focus on PSB management in Ethiopia. In this context, the study specifically sought to interpret the lived experiences reported by PSB managers and editors-in-chief as they lived and expressed. To explore these experiential accounts, a phenomenological approach was employed.

A phenomenological study, to Creswell (2016), is "a detailed description of how a number of individuals experience a specific phenomenon" (p.549). And "with this kind of study, data are gathered from participants who are having or have had a direct experience of the phenomenon of interest" (Larsen & Adu, 2022, p.106). Of the various variants of phenomenological approach, a Heideggerian framework of hermeneutic phenomenology was used. Hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenological research enables the researchers to look through changing lenses (new understandings) in order to comprehend a phenomenon. (Larsen & Adu, 2022; Peoples, 2021). In so doing the researchers' leanings are to be embraced as "biases cannot be set aside or bracketed" in hermeneutic phenomenological studies (Peoples, 2021, p.35). With all the preconceived knowledge of the researchers on the issue studied, hermeneutic phenomenological research was found to be more suitable. Hence, this method was aptly used for the study as the researchers had personally experienced the PSB either as media manager and/or as advisor and member of board of directors of AMC and EBC.

This study was designed to explore the phenomenon of "independence in the shadow of power" within the public media domain in Ethiopia. It examines how public media institutions experience and negotiate independence in contexts marked by political, financial, and institutional pressures. It further examines

how such restrictions shape editorial judgment, organizational practices, and the broader mandates of serving the public.

Scholars consulted for this study indicate that a phenomenological research design typically involves selecting up to 25 participants. This sample size is generally regarded as adequate for exploring rich and detailed experiences. Accordingly, Creswell (2016) proposes a range of three to 15 individuals. On the other hand, Polkinghorne, cited in Creswell and Poth (2018), recommends a sample size of five to 25 individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon under study. Peoples (2021) also suggest eight to 15 participants. So, researchers employing a phenomenological research may consider a sample size between three and 25 participants. In this hermeneutic phenomenological study, the sample comprised nine participants. All participants had, in one way or the other, experienced the phenomenon under investigation between 2012 and 2025 and was directly involved in, or had significant influence in the public media management.

The researchers employed purposive sampling, a technique commonly used in hermeneutic phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Peoples, 2021). Both the participants and the institutions were selected intentionally based on their relevance to the study. Data were collected through interviews designed to capture participants' lived experiences in rich detail (Zahavi, 2019). A semi-structured interview protocol guided the conversations. This approach, as recommended by Peoples (2021), allowed the researchers to focus on questions aligned with the key research questions while remaining open to exploring additional issues raised by participants. The interview questions were open-ended, providing flexibility for deeper discussion and elaboration.

Research participants were drawn from four media houses claiming at the service of public interest. The participants, drawn from the four media outlets were highly experienced and well acquainted with the various dimensions of independence in the PSBs. They are ideally positioned to provide insights into how institutional autonomy was challenged, operational independence was constrained; editorial decision-making was compromised, and financial independence remained a persistent struggle. In short, all the participants representing the selected broadcasters experienced the life world of the central phenomenon- independence in the shadow of power within the public media domain in Ethiopia.

Fortunately, some research participants had experienced in multiple institutions related to the topic being studied or held concurrent roles at the same time, allowing them to provide broader and more nuanced insights on the phenomenon under study. For example, one of the participants was manager at a regional media outlet, a deputy manager at national broadcaster, speaker of a

state council. Another participant was an instructor at a university in media and communication, a deputy chief executive officer at a national media, and a deputy manager at a broadcast media outlet. Generally, the participants' profile composed of the four media outlets constituted one general manager, one executive, four deputy managers and three editors-in-chief.

Data were analyzed in this study employing the six-tire analytical flowchart model by Peoples (2021). The six steps respectively are: (1) reading the initial individual interview transcripts, (2) generating preliminary meaning units, (3) generating final meaning units, (4) Synthesize final meaning units into situated narratives, (5) Synthesize situated narratives into general narratives, and (6) Generate general description. Put them differently, the result and discussion section aptly used these simplified approach: Themes and subtheme introduction; Presenting participants' voices; Synthesizing of findings; Linking findings to literature; Presenting essence of each subtheme.

Participants held a minimum educational qualification of a Master's degree. Out of the nine research participants in this study, only one was a female. As leadership positions are numerically dominated by male leaders, proportional number of female participants was not represented in this study. Participants were professionally qualified in their respective field and had a minimum of 13 years of experience. All interviews were audio recorded and each participant was interviewed once except for unrecorded informal discussions on developments on related issues to the study with some of the participants. The participants answered the interview questions with ease, drawing on their recollections.

Finally, The results and discussion section presents and interprets the findings of the phenomenological inquiry which aimed at exploring how PSB managers in Ethiopia experience and give meaning to their professional and leadership autonomy within a politically influenced environment. The findings are organized thematically in a manner that reflects the shared meanings and discrepancies that emerged from participants' lived experiences. Through hermeneutic interpretation, the main researcher has repeatedly read and reflected the data to uncover the core meaning of the phenomenon. In the context of this research, the term "managers" refers to individuals occupying leadership positions in a PSB ranging from the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and deputy CEO to the editor-in-chief. Also, the term "editor-in-chief" is used in this study as it is the designation consistently employed across broadcast media organizations in Ethiopia in their respective institutional contexts.

Results and Discussion

This section is organized under three themes and six subthemes based on the data analysis procedures and the data that emanate from the in-depth interviews conducted.

Three overarching themes that emerged from the interviews are presented under the following categories: (i) In the grip of authority, (ii) Whoever holds the purse string holds the power, and (iii) Legal and policy framework. These central themes summarize the underlying standpoints of the participants' lived experiences. Within these three major thematic categories, seven subthemes were identified,: (i) Imposed narratives, (ii) How power shapes script, (iii) Institutional conformity, (iv) Government funding and conditional support, (v) When commercial interest influences decisions, (vi) Laws and policies as Trojan horse, and (vii) Appointments based on patronage. These subthemes provide a nuanced understanding of how participants experience and interpret the phenomenon under study. They represented not only the participants' voices but also the researchers' interpretive understanding developed from their own experience in the PSB system, engagement with the existing data, and facts from pertinent literature. Together, they reveal how independence is lived, negotiated, and challenged in a political and institutional power setting of PSB.

In the grip of authority

Damissah et al. (2025) described that media independence is not only about freedom from governmental control but also about the existence of robust institutional safeguards, adherence to professional standards, and the maintenance of public trust.

Research participants portrayed their professional environment as one overshadowed by persistent political and institutional control. The influence of government officials, board members, and communication offices permeated both editorial and managerial decisions with hardly little room for independent judgment. This theme captures how authority is internalized and normalized within the daily work culture of PSB professionals. This in turn shaped their routines and overall sense of professional identity.

Participants lived experience in relation to this central theme reflected a continuous negotiation to those who controlled the narrative that led to an institutional adaptation evolving over time.

Imposed narratives

Participants described how editorial priorities were often shaped by Government Communication Affairs Office (GCAO) than by editorial meeting deliberations. Some managers and editors-in-chief expressed frustration that their professional role had been reduced to merely implementing political

directives. This sentiment was echoed by university educators in media and communication who observed similar pattern of political influence undermining professional and institutional autonomy.

A senior-editor-in-chief (Participant 1) described, "Editorial agendas in public media have been largely directed by the GCAO which assigns coverage topics every Tuesday and monitors implementation." A deputy CEO (Participant 2) added, "Before 2018, GCAO gathered managers and instructed them on what to do and what not to do. Now, the Press Secretariat of the Prime Minister's Office has joined GCAO for this role." Similarly, a veteran PSB CEO whose professional experience spanning multiple public media outlets (Participant 8) also observed, "If the Communications Office creates news and sends it to the media, what then is the role of a news service or broadcaster? "A manager who was also a journalist in PSB (Participant 8) reflected, "Since the establishment of the public media, GCAO has consistently sent a monthly as well as weekly agenda or what they call *media theme* to the regional media."

As a result, the newsroom has come to function primarily as public relations instruments and an extension of state narratives machinery, prioritizing government achievements while neglecting local issues and community voices. Participants' stories suggest that meaning is not negotiated and discovered through journalist processes; rather manufactured and prescribed by government bodies. Together, these voices reveal a shared perception of disempowerment and loss of professional composition.

The experience reveals systemic control where the routines of communication offices replace the ethics of editorial judgment. Along these lines, Buckley et al. (2008) observe that "maintaining editorial independence in practice remains a challenge" (p.190), a concern echoed by Jusic and Gilberds (2022) who note that PSB continue to face ongoing pressures on their editorial autonomy and operation.

The essence of these experiences can be understood as 'voicing prescribed accounts'. Imposed narratives not only crush the morals and creativity of the managers but also erode the confidence of journalists. Consequently, the public media become conduit for agendas that are elsewhere.

How power shapes script

Participants consistently narrated that much of their professional assignments were engagements in handling and executing agendas from political figures. Participant 8 explained, "When we plan to conduct interviews with high-ranking officials, such as the Prime Minister, we typically follow two approaches. First, the questions we prepare are sent to the Prime Minister's office, edited, and returned, leaving the journalist unable to ask anything beyond what was approved. Second, the office prepares and sends the questions directly,

and the journalist simply asks them as provided." Participant 2 added, "Government officials go so far as to produce programs on their own and send them for broadcast, leaving us with no right to edit or modify the content." An editor-in-chief (Participant 7) also expressed, "Journalists are frequently indoctrinated by so-called training sessions designed to shape in the service of specific agenda."

The subtheme illustrates how political elites infiltrate editorial autonomy and the media's mission is shifted from serving the public to serving power. Editorial responsibility is becoming merely a routine deliberation to keep political directions put in place. All what is written about journalistic independence in the media editorial policy remains expectations as professionalism gets blurred by propaganda.

Editorial independence is a key factor not only for media outlets but also for the public they serve, as it is critical to fostering democratization (FDRE, 2021; ACHPR, 2019; FDRE, 1995; UNDP, 2004; UNESCO, 2008). Hanretty (2011) adds, monopoly and low level of public media independence favors government of the day.

The essence of participants lived experience under this subtheme brings to light how political authorship takes control of professionalism. The journalist's role as a voice for the voiceless is increasingly overshadowed by the dominating voice of political elites. Consequently, authority of officials replaces and coerces media managers and journalists to lose voices to power. What resonates through the microphone is the agenda of power, neither the public's voice nor the journalist's perspective.

Institutional conformity

Participants described how conformity to institutional and political expectations gradually becomes an accepted norm within PSB. They revealed that how managerial decisions, newsroom routines, and even self-expression were unconsciously shaped by a culture of alignment with political authority. An editor-in-chief (Participant 7) of a national PSB articulated, "As the hands of the GCAO and politicians extend further into the media, we grow weary and end up doing little more than aligning ourselves with them. Over time, we become accustomed to acting in line with their interests even before receiving any instruction. So, it is like a person who, when told to 'jump,' responds by asking, 'How high?'" A senior editor-in-chief (Participant 1) reflected, "There is virtually no distinction between the state of journalism before 2018 and its condition today. The profession has been transformed into a vehicle for government messaging and propaganda apparatus where adopting a posture of compliance serves as a means of survival." Participant 14 added, "In such times

of conflict, the situation often becomes more conducive for journalists to safely follow the pattern and submit to institutional norms of whatsoever."

Participants' experiences with institutional conformity are not primarily about freedom of speech or the violation of editorial policy. Nor do they concern overt resistance to authority or attempts to overturn the existing order of coercion. Rather, conformity gradually evolves into a silent acceptance of the prevailing circumstances, an alignment with the expectations of those in power. Managers and journalists often set aside their own editorial judgment and follow instructions from outside. Over time, this makes conformity the rule, not the exception.

Studies indicate that persistent pressure on organizations would give rise to conformity. In this context, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) introduced about coercive isomorphism which formally or informally occurs when organizations are pressured by powerful external actors. In the context of PSB, such pressure commonly comes from governments, regulatory authorities, or influential political actors, including the GCAO and incumbent ruling parties. A key expression of this institutional conformity within the Ethiopian PSB landscape is widespread self-censorship. As noted by UNESCO (2022), Ethiopian public media institutions frequently engage in self-censoring practices.

Living within a situation that quietly governs both thought and action lies at the heart of participants' experience. They inhabit a world where authority no longer needs to issue commands; it has already been internalized and understood. Participants' compliance is a strategy for belonging and survival within a system that rewards alignment. Professionalism, weakened by the weight of conformity, loses its capacity to stand apart. Although the language of public service is used, daily practice is guided by silent expectations of obedience which is becoming widely accepted as normal.

Whoever holds the purse string holds the power

This theme focuses on how control and allocation of funds from government or commercial sources shape organizational decisions, operational independence, and staff autonomy. Participants' experiences suggest that reliance on external funding can restrict editorial freedom, influence which projects receive attention, and reduce the organization's ability to fully serve public interest. Based on their experiences, two subthemes emerge: *government funding and conditional support*, and *when commercial interest influences decision*.

Government funding and conditional support

Research participants emphasized that financial dependence on government budgets shaped nearly every dimension of their institutional and professional autonomy. Funding was often allocated or withheld as a tool of leverage based on the broadcaster's perceived loyalty to government priorities. Participant 7 shared what a government official stated in a training session organized for editors-in-chief, "'whatever we fund and invest in means you're expected to align with our demands.' That is what we already knew." Participant 8 added, "Though the funds allocated by government to the PSB are collected from public tax, they are used as a means of controlling the public media and making their survival contingent on government funding." A member of state council (Participant 2) recalled, "PSBs often remain dependent on government approval for both their regular and supplementary budgets. This dependence can be used to influence media behavior and, thus, supplementary budgets are usually rewarded to more loyal media outlets."

The experience of conditional support shows how economic dependence is translated into a language of compliance. The subtheme reveals an understanding that financing, while essential, serves as a subtle mechanism of control where economic power shapes editorial submission and turns independence into conditional autonomy. Within this context of capture, independence becomes tolerated only to the extent that it aligns with the priorities of those who provide the means to exist.

The finding, however, goes in contrary to accepted international standards and domestic promises. Public broadcasters should be funded and managed in a manner to ensuring public interest, operating independently of both government control and market influence, and remaining free from political or commercial pressure (UNESCO, 2008). In this respect, therefore, media outlets should diversify funding and adopt alternative mechanisms to maintain autonomy from political and commercial pressures and diminish dependence on advertising Cárdenas et al., 2017). Similarly, the existing Ethiopian media law also affirms that PSB is independent of government (FDRE, 2021). This implies the government may fund or regulate PSB, but it should not put pressure on programming, framing or editorial choices.

Participants' experiences reveal that government controls PSB through multiple channels, with financial allocation playing a particularly powerful role. Participants described that loyalty and compliance with government expectations often overshadowed editorial independence and interests of the wider public. Funds collected from the public through taxes, with the purpose of serving the public, are instead seen as being used to advance the interests of those in power.

Thus, financing becomes not a means of empowerment, but a tool of sustaining the dependency regime and privileging the interests of those in political power.

When commercial interest influences decision

Participants observed that public media in Ethiopia have increasingly pursued advertising revenue and sponsorship. While such revenue streams may be essential for outlets like FMC, whose income largely depends on commercial sources, they are less justified for those that receive substantial government funding. Nevertheless, participants noted that both types of institutions are similarly influenced by commercial interests, as all ultimately serve power rather than the public. A participant who served as an of journalism and is now serving in one of the broadcast media outlets claiming to serve the public interest (Participant 2) described, "We cannot compete with EBC as it benefits by substantial sponsorship from government-owned banks, which in turn limits the outlet's editorial autonomy." An executive in the marketing division (Participant 12) added, "When advertisers engage in questionable or corrupt practices, we often lack the courage to criticize them openly…… no one wants to pay and get insulted." A deputy CEO for marketing and customer service at a media house (Participant 13) recalled, "It is impossible to criticize sponsoring institutions when they are involved in corrupt practices. It is understandable that the money controls the content. Once, we aired a report criticizing an organization based on findings of an independent audit office. The institution immediately terminated its contract with us, and the head even threatened us over the phone. Neither do government organs encourage you to expose such wrongdoings risking loosing advertising and sponsorship revenues."

The subtheme "when commercial interest influences decision" highlights how media outlets which ostensibly operate claiming primarily to serve in public interest are subtly, yet pervasively, are shaped by commercial pressures. Participants' experiences revealed how media content is frequently caught between serving the public and acquiescing to business partners. This subtheme, therefore, exposes another form of dependency.

Participants' lived experiences reveal that the PSB remains persistently vulnerable to both political influence and commercial pressures. Government and powerful advertisers or sponsors advance their own agendas often at the expense of the interests of the wider public. In this regard, ARTICLE 19 (2003) notes that political authorities use licensing to exert control over the media while commercial actors monopolize broadcasting and prioritize low-quality, yet profitable programming. As Abbott (2016) emphasizes, a media sector that genuinely supports democracy must be editorially independent, financially sustainable, and firmly committed to serving the public interest. Additionally,

the respective editorial policies of public broadcasters in Ethiopia underlines the content or schedule of a sponsored program must not be under the influence of the sponsors or advertisers (FMC, 2025; AMC, 2023; FBC, 2017; EBC, 2015; FDRE; 2012b).

At its core, this experience reflects a trade-off between mission and money. Participants inhabit a professional environment where financial endurance frequently shapes editorial limits. In their efforts to remain competitive, the PSBs face the paradox of a public service measured by market acceptance. In the end, public broadcasters often have to balance financial needs against editorial integrity, undermining the core values of their mandates.

Legal and policy framework

In principle, media laws and policy frameworks are designed to protect institutional independence and guide professional practice. This central theme, accordingly, examines the gap between the existence of laws or policies and their practical implementation, highlighting how legal frameworks may fail to translate into meaningful protections for independence in the public media sector. Participants' experiences suggest that laws, on their own, are ineffective without genuine political commitment and clear enforcement mechanisms. For a better interpretation of participants' lived experiences, this theme is examined through two subthemes: *media laws and policies as a Trojan horse* and *appointments based on patronage.*

Media Laws and policies as Trojan horse

This subtheme explores how laws and policy instruments intended to ensure PSB independence are impractical and conditionally implemented detached from the realities of newsroom operation. Participants perceive these frameworks as symbolic merely existing more on paper than in practice. Participant 2 described, "The laws and policies are used for cover-up and imitation, but not in practice. As the culture of control and restriction remains deeply entrenched, we do what our bosses instructed us, and our journalists do what we order them to do." Participant 7 added, "In the Ethiopian media management, law and practice rarely align. For example, while balance and objectivity are formally part of our editorial policy, they are seldom realized in practice." Member of a state council standing committee overseeing PSB (Participant 16) recalled, "Obeying or not obeying the law is conditional. An interview I gave and was aired on public TV station news was a critical story of the government. Afterwards, an official called the station manager, demanding the dismissal of the journalist responsible for producing that particular news story."

Research participants' perspectives suggest that the legal and policy frameworks designed to protect PSB independence function more as symbolic

commitments than which rarely reflected in actual reality. Article 29 of the 1995 Ethiopian Constitution and the laws and policies put in place afterwards are largely instrument of legitimacy rather than authentic tools to foster media independence and, in effect, democracy.

Participants' experiences align with what various scholars observations that media-related laws often undermine constitutional guarantees by unduly restricting free expression, promoting self-censorship, and diminishing the media's democratic function (CIPESA, 2020; Daniel, 2019; Yesuneh, 2018). Abdissa (2021) remarks that there remains a possibility that recently enacted media and related laws, despite their seemingly progressive intent, could be instrumentalized to suppress the media when political interests are at stake.

The substance of participants' experiences highlights the impractical and selective enforcement of laws designed to ensure PSB independence undermine their autonomy due to the absence of genuine institutional and political will for their implementation.

Appointments based on patronage

A veteran journalist and instructors from schools of media and communication (Participant 4) added, "Although the law formally guarantees independence, media management remains dominated by ruling party loyalists, with decision-making confined to a narrow political circle, effectively turning the media into an extension of the party." A senior official with extensive experience in media and communication (Participant 8) expressed, "Appointees are often political figures or individuals affiliated with the ruling party, with placements extending down to the editor-in-chief positions though a nominal, staged process of open competition is conducted." Participant 9 added, "Since people on the media board are being appointed and given political allegiance beyond what the law allows, they stifle the flow of information and the media environment."

Experiential accounts point to a systemic pattern in which leadership appointments are driven by political allegiance rather than professional merit. Accordingly, positions from media board membership to down to the editor-in-chief are extension of government power, eroding the operational and editorial autonomy of the broadcaster.

Participants' accounts suggest that appointments in the public media are predominantly inspired by political objectives and appointees' loyalty to the prevailing political order. This finding aligns with Ayele et al. (2021) and UNESCO (2022) whose studies confirm that political appointments not only exist within the public media but also have a history of appointments prioritizing loyalty to the incumbent political system.

Therefore, the essence of participants' lived experiences discloses how patronage-based appointments are perceived to shape leadership into an instrument of political pressures instead of protecting public interest within PSB.

Conclusions

The participants' lived experiences collectively illuminate a deeply entrenched system in which political, financial, and legal forces erode the autonomy and moral foundation of public service broadcasting in Ethiopia. The findings further show that the media outlets examined (AMC, AMN, EBC, and FMC) is deeply embedded in these challenges and have become subject to the same systemic pressures. Their day-to-day operations reflect broader structural suppression in which political interference, financial dependence, and weak legal enforcement converge to undermine editorial autonomy and public trust.

These experiences reveal that a situation in which journalists and media managers feel compelled to align their narratives with priorities set by political authorities. This imposed form of storytelling not only limits professional creativity but also erodes moral integrity, weakens professional confidence, and gradually turns public media into a channel for advancing the agenda of political elites. As a result, as politically inspired interests gain greater influence, the journalist's traditional role as a "voice for the voiceless" becomes less prominent in practice. This political dominance is sustained not only through overt interference but also through the internalization of obedience. The PSB's identity, therefore, evolves from being a watchdog of power to a symbolic extension of power.

Equally critical is the financial dimension of control. Financial reliance on government financing and commercial sponsors compromises editorial priorities and redefines professional integrity in political and market terms. Participants' experiences expose how state funding collected from taxpayers in the name of serving citizens has been converted into a tool for consolidating loyalty. This dependency often results in conflict of interests as the broadcaster may feel pressured to concede to the very authority it is mandated to independently scrutinize and hold accountable.

These challenges are further intensified by the limited effectiveness of legal and policy frameworks intended to protect the independence of PSB. Although media laws and reform initiatives suggest progress in formal terms, participants' accounts point to a clear gap between legal provisions and everyday practice. Measures designed to safeguard independence are not often consistently applied or weakened by the lack of continued political and institutional commitment. In addition, patronage-based appointments, where leadership roles are shaped more by political loyalty than professional competence, continue to reinforce patterns of control.

Participants' lived experiences, taken together, depict an intricate environment in which political influence, financial dependence, and institutional compliance intersect to sustain systemic suppression on PSB. Within this context, professionalism is not simply practiced but continually compromised and silenced under prevailing power relations. The sense of moral and professional fatigue expressed by participants reflects personal strain to find meaning in a system that tends to favor obedience rather than professionalism

In sum, enhancing the credibility and democratic contribution of PSB, therefore, requires more than formal legal reform or administrative change. It also depends on a broader participation, belongingness, and engagement to enrich democratic discourse in a manner that ensures independence of the broadcasters within the domain of the media laws.

Implication

The findings are deemed significant to the academia, policy makers and media organizations. Although legal and policy frameworks formally guarantee the independence of public broadcasters, in practice their implementation sharply diverges from these commitments. This implies that legal reforms per se are insufficient unless appointment procedures, funding models and oversight structures to prevent governments capture are revisited. Likewise, the pervasive institutionalization of conformity to political narratives has displaced the core public service mandates of public broadcasters which call for a broader transformation of the political system that restores institutional neutrality, managerial autonomy, and editorial independence. For the academia, the study underscores that the need for deeper exploration of the interlocking systemic dependencies that constrain PSB autonomy. Finally, as the primary financers of public broadcasting, reminds that citizens must demand accountability from both the media and the government to reclaim the PSB's role as a genuine public service.

Declarations

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest at this level.

Data Availability

The data can be obtained from the main author upon reasonable request.

Funding

Acknowledgement

Declaration of consent

The authors obtained informed consent from the research participants to use the data for this research.

Reference

Abbott, S. (2016). Rethinking Public Service Broadcasting's Place in International Media Development. CIMA. https://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/CIMA_2016_Public_Service_Broadcasting.pdf.

Abdissa Z. (2021). *State-Media Relations in the Post-EPRDF Era: Continuities & Discontinuities* (Lecture Note). University of New Mexico, USA.

Abdissa Zerai & Getachew Dinku (2024). Journalism in Ethiopia. Addis Ababa: Sunflower Printing Press.

ACHPR (2019). Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa. Banjul: African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR).

AMC (2023). Editorial Policy. Bahir Dar. (Original document in Amharic).

AMN (2022). Editorial Policy. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. (Original document in Amharic).

AMN (2024). A Seven Year Master Plan (2024-2031). Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. .(Original document in Amharic).

Andargachew Tiruneh (2017). Ethiopia's Post-1991 Media Landscape: the Legal Perspective. Addis Ababa: Eclipse Printing Press.

Anand, V. E. (2014). Development Journalism: A Catalyst for Positive Change. Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences.

ARTICLE 19 (2003). Broadcasting Policy and Practice in Africa. https://www.article19.org.

Ayele A, Adem C. & Skjerdal, T. (2021).An Investigation on the Perspectives of Political Economy: The Case of Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC). East African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, Volume 6 (2) 67-82.

Banda, F. (2007). An Appraisal of the Applicability of Development Journalism in the Context of Public Service Broadcasting (PSB). COMMUNICATIO Volume 33(2), 2007, doi:

Buckley, S., Duer, K., Mendel, T. & Siochru, S. O. (2008). Broadcasting, Voice and Accountability: A Public Interest Approach to Policy, Law, and Regulation. Washington DC: The World Bank.

Buzayehu Musbah & Mekonnen Hailemariam (2024). Examining journalists' practice since March 2018 of the political reform of Ethiopia. *Ethiopian Journal of Language, Culture and Communication*, 9(2).121-151. DOI: 10.20372/ejlcc.v9i2.1895.

Cárdenas, P. J., Declercq, A., Lai, M.S. & Rasquine N. (2017).The Political Economy of Media Capture. Department of International Development (LSE).

CIPESA (Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa) (2020). Analysis of Ethiopia's Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation No.1185 /2020. https://cipesa.org.

Creswell, J. W. (2016). *Essential Skills for the Qualitative Researcher*. SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.1177/15586898211028107

Creswell, J.W., & Poth, C.N. (2018). Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design Fourth Edition: Choosing among Five Approaches (4th ed). London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Damissah, H.E., Isiaka, A. F., Adejare, A. D. & Ogunlana, I.O. (2025).Media independence and democratic accountability in modern governance systems and public administration frameworks, https://gsconlinepress.com/journals/gscarr/.

Daniel Bekele (2019). Restrictions on Press Freedom in Ethiopia: An Historical Analysis of Ethiopian Laws and Compliance with International Law. St. Hugh's College, Dphil Trinity Term.

DiMaggio, P.J. & Powell, W.W. (1983). The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality In Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review*,48 (147-160), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255482957.

Djankov, S., Mcliesh C., Nenova T. & Shleifer A. (2003). Who Owns The Media? Journal of Law and Economics, vol. XLVI (The University of Chicago.. 0022-2186/2003/4602-0014$01.50

Domatob,J.K.& Hall, S.W.(1983).Development Journalism in Black Africa. Amsterdam: Institute voor Perswetenschap.

EBA (2019). *Yemegenagna Bizuhan Tederasiyan Asteyayetina Yehizb ena Nigid Radio ena Television yizet Ager akef Tinat* (unofficially translated as *A nationwide study examining audience opinions and media content in public and commercial radio and television.*)Addis Ababa: SoJC

EBC (2015). Editorial Policy. Addis Ababa.(Original document in English).

FBC (2017). Editorial Policy. Addis Ababa.(Original document in Amharic).

Ethiopia News Agency (ENA) (2019). The First Congress of Prosperity Party and Public Expectations. https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/en_34154.

FDRE (1995). Proclamation of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Federal Negarit Gazette, No.1, 21st August.

FDRE (2012a). *Limatawi Midia, Communication ena Ye Ethiopia Hidasse* [Unofficial translation: Developmental Media, Communication and the Ethiopian Renaissance]. (Government unpublished policy document, Amharic version).

FDRE (2012b). A Proclamation on Advertisement.Proclamation No. 759/2012.

FDRE. (2020). *Ye Ethiopia Federalawi Democraciyawi Republic Ye Megenagna Bizuhan Policy.* (Unofficial translation: Ethiopian Mass Media Policy). Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

FDRE (2021). Media Proclamation. Proclamation No. 1238/2021, Federal Negarit Gazette No. 22, 5th April.

FMC (Fana Media Corporation). (2025). Editorial Policy. Addis Ababa.(Original document in Amharic).

GCAO (2012). Developmental Media and Communication Policy and Strategy.(Original document in Amharic). Addis Ababa (unpublished).

GCAO (2015). Democratic Developmental Communication Policy and Strategy (Original document in Amharic). Addis Ababa (unpublished).

Hanretty, C. (2011). Public Broadcasting and Political Interference. London: Routledge.

Harding, P. (2015). Public service media in divided societies: Relic or renaissance? www.bbcmediaaction.org.

Human Rights Watch (2019). Ethiopia: Events of 2018. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/ethiopia?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

Jemal M. (2025). *Dembarawocu Megenagna Bizuhan* **[Unofficial translation: the Jumbled Mass Media).**

Jones, T. M. (2008). Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics (Book Review). *Comparative Political Studies* **41 (1) 128-138 http://online.sagepub.com.**

Jusic,T. & Gilberds, H.(2022).Media Reform amid Political Upheaval: Lessons from Burma, Ethiopia, Sudan, Tunisia, and Ukraine. https://www.cima.ned.org/).

Karppinen, K. & Moe, H. (2016). What We Talk about When Talk about "Media Independence". Javnost -the Public, 23:2, 105-119, https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2016.1162986.

Odhiambo, L.O.(1991).Development Journalism in Africa: Capitulation of the Fourth Estate? Africa Media Review, Vol. 5, No. 2.

McChesney, R.(2015). Rich Media, Poor Democracy. New York: The New Press (Originally published in 1999).

McQuail, D. (2010). Mass Communication Theory (6th ed). London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Meseret, C. (2013). The Quest for Press Freedom: One Hundred Years of History of the Media in Ethiopia. Maryland: University Press of America.

MoI (Ministry of Information). (2002). *Be Ethiopia Yedimocracy Serat Ginbata Gudayoch* (Amharic version). [Unofficial translation: Issues Related to Democratization in Ethiopia.] Ethiopia, Addis Ababa.

Mulatu A.(2022). Post-2018 Media Landscape in Ethiopia: A Review. Addis Ababa: CARD.~~Skjerdal, T. (2011). Development Journalism Revived: The case of Ethiopia. Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies, 32:2, 58-74.~~

Peoples, K. (2021). How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation: A Step-by-Step Guide. California: SAGE Publications, Inc.

People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1987). Proclamation of the Constitution of the Constitution of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Federal Negarit Gazetta, vol 47, No.1, 12 September 1987.

Psychogiopoulou, E., Anagnostou, D., Smith, R. and Stolte, Y. (2017) The Freedom and Independence of Public Service Media in Europe: International Standards and Their Domestic Implementation. International Journal of Communication 11, http://ijoc.org.

Siebert, F. S., Peterson, T., and Schramm, W,. (1963). Four Theories of the Press. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Skjerdal, T. (2012). Competing loyalties: Journalism culture in the Ethiopian state media. Doctoral thesis, University of Oslo.

Smith, E. (2012). A Road Map to Public Service Broadcasting, Kuala Lumpur: the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union.

Stremlau, N. (2008).The Press and Consolidation of Power in Ethiopia and Uganda. A thesis submitted to the Development Studies Institute of the London School of Economics for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, London.

UNDP (2004). Supporting Public Service Broadcasting. Bureau for Development Policy, Democratic Governance Group.

UNESCO (2005). Public Service Broadcasting: A best practices sourcebook.
https://kasajoo.com/public_service_broadcasting_a_best_practices_sourcebook.pdf.

UNESCO (2008). Media Development Indicators: A framework for assessing media development.
http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001631/163102e.pdf.

UNESCO (2022). Assessment of Media Development in Ethiopia. France: UNESCO.

Yesuneh A. (2018). Defamation Law in Ethiopia: The Interplay between the Right to Reputation and Freedom of Expression.
http://www.scirp.org/journal/blr.

Wimmer, J. and Wolf, S. (2005).Development journalism out of date?: An analysis of its significance in journalism education at African universities.
http://epub.ub.uni-muenchen.de/archive/00000647.