

## Mass Media and Governance: Issues and Challenges in Contemporary Ethiopia

Tesfaye Bezabih

PhD Candidate, Department of Mass Communication, Assam University, Silchar

### Introduction

The concept and issues of governance is as old as human history, though its theoretical and practical aspect is historically linked with Western Enlightenment. At ancient times, groups of people who form a community, select a person or number of persons who can represent their interest and control their community from other enemies. Through time, the number and psychological make-up of the community has become too complex to be lead by the selected chairperson. This requires well trained and professional governor (Gerring, et al., 2005). Since the era of enlightenment, governance has got eight (bureaucratic quality, tax revenue, investment rating, trade openness, Gross Domestic Products (GDP), infant mortality and life expectancy) measures. Among these, illiteracy is mentioned as the indicator and evidence of broad patterns of governance. Activities of the government then came to be analyzed and discussed by the society. Various features and standards were formulated for checking the jobs of governments (Gerring, 2005).

However, in broad terms, there are no objective standards for determining governance as good or bad. Norris (2006) noted that based up on the subjective perceptions, there are five indicators of good governance accountability, lack of corruption, transparency, efficiency and effectiveness, and consensus oriented, responsiveness, and equity and inclusiveness. To scrutinize these indicators, Petters (2003) explained that media can play greater role in disseminating information to create an informed debate in the society

In the generic sense of the world, governance means the tasks of running a government or any appropriate entity. Governance is sometimes used as a synonym for government. Nonetheless, governance is a more extensive idea than government. The British Council portrayed governance as communications between the formal institutions and those in civil societies. As indicated by the body, governance alludes to a procedure whereby components in the public eye employ power, specialist and impact and sanction arrangements and choices concerning open life and social upliftment.

Governance from the aforesaid encompasses but transcends the collective meaning of related concepts such as: the state, government, regime and good government. It implies organizational effectiveness in relation to policy formation and implementations, in the conduct of economic, social, cultural, political and technological policies and the contribution of these to growth, stability and people welfare. In the words of Fukuda-Par and Ponzio (2002), "Governance is about process, not about ends". Governance is about the process by which power and authority are exercised in a society, by which government, the private sector, and citizens' groups articulate their interest, mediate their differences and exercise their legal rights and obligations (ibid). Governance has also been described as the conscious management of regime structures with a view to enhancing the public realm. Benz (2004) identified the core meaning of governance as 'steering and coordination of independent (usually collective) actors based on institutionalized rule systems'. Treib et al (2005) asserted that the description of governance covers all three understandings of concept that has so far been presented in literatures. They emphasized that these different understandings depend on whether governance is seen belonging primarily to the realms of the three PSC (Politics, Policy and Polity).

The UNDP (2002) described governance as:

*The activity of monetary, political and regulatory specialist to deal with a nation's issues at all levels. It includes systems, process and foundations, through which nationals and groups express their interests, practice the lawful rights, meet their commitments and intercede their differences.*

Similarly the World Bank (1992) in its own description of governance concluded that governance is the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic resources. It further identifies three distinct aspects of governance:

- 1) The form of political regime
- 2) The process by which authority is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development and
- 3) The capacity of government to design, formulate and implement policies and discharge functions.

Governance is machinery of legitimate and/or illegitimate administrative order, authority and control (populist or parochial) over a defined geographical population. That is an instrument of administrative order, authority and control presupposes that for the order, authority and control to be exercised, there has to be means of information and communication to and fro those that exercise the legitimate or illegitimate populists or parochial order, authority, and control are excised upon. This is no doubt is where the role of the mass media

becomes paramount.

To see other points with this view, on the link between governance and mass media (UNESCO, 2005) questioned what is governance? What makes it good/and in here it plainly revealed that the necessary ingredient for governance include participation by as broad section a section of the population s possible, accountability and transparency. All of these qualities require the action of free, independent and vigorous information media. Only when journalists are free to monitor, investigate and criticize the public administration's policies and actions can good governance takes hold. Yet in much of the world, press freedom, where it exists at all, is under increasing attack.

From the above analysis, some questions begging an answer. To illustrate these:

- 1) Is there any relationship between mass media and governance?
- 2) Can there be mass media without governance and vice versa?
- 3) What unifies mass media, governance and society?

### **Theoretical framework**

To understand the relationship between mass media and governance and by extension, society goes beyond a peripheral understanding of what mass media represent. It involves a presupposition of relating to questions that as media are essentially concerned with the production and distribution of knowledge. It entails the realization that our experiences of the social world are influenced by the mass media.

According to Mc Quail (2000:164):

*The information images and ideas made available by the media may for most people be the main source of awareness of a shared pastime and of a present social location. They are a store of memories and a map of where we are and may also provide the materials for orientation to the future..The media to a large extent serve to constitute our participations and definitions of social reality and normality for purpose of a public, shared social life and a key source of standard models and norms.*

While there is no doubt that the mass media have been interposed between man and our experiences of the world beyond our immediate personal environment and our direct sense observation, it is a also a fact that the mass media provide continuous line of thought contact with the main institutions of the society in which we exist. Mc Quali (ibid) concluded thus:

Mackay and Sullivan (1999) stated the media role beyond religion, and social aspects as:

*The importance of media and Media Corporation however is much greater than their significance as powerful economic and productive forces. It is widely acknowledged that the media are different from other industries because of the special nature of their activity and product. It is via the media that symbolic culture is communicated through them; social values and ways of making sense of everyday lives and culture are disseminated. Thus, as well as being major industries in the modern economy, the media occupy a very significant role in the symbolic environment as cultural institutions.*

According to Lasswell (1948), the main functions of mass communication (journalism) in a society are surveillance of the environment, correlation of the parts of the society in responding to its environment and the transmission of cultural heritage. Wright (1975) added attainment as the fourth key media function. Mendelsohn(1996) interpreted Wright's addition of entertainment to include that of providing individual reward, relaxation and reduction of tension that makes it easier for people to cope with real life problems and for society to avoid breakdown. McQuail (2000:79) added mobilization as the fifth function of the mass media. According to McQuail(ibid), "Mobilization is designed to reflect the wide spared application of mass communication to political and commercial propaganda".

According to Ahuja(1997), mass communication is necessary to a national consciousness sprit and concerted action. He state that the mass media provide information to a nation's people and the more information people get, the more they are interested in political developments (ditto economic, social and technological developments).

Ahuja (ibid) stressed thus:

*communication for the most part serves an intensifying capacity, additionally as connecting the political procedure to the general population giving the basic premise to judiciousness in mass legislative issues, and giving structure and structure to the political procedure by reminding government officials that political demonstrations have results and the people of what and what the demonstrations are and what the outcomes may be.*

In Schramm's view(1976) mass communication must be used to (a) contribute to a felling of nation-ness, (b) s a voice of national arranging,(c), to help show vital skills,(d) to extend the effective market (e) to help people look for the future (f) to prepare people to play their role(s) as nations among nations.

We need remind ourselves that if the mass media are to be effective in performing the aforesaid functions among others, restrictions and obstacles such as draconian laws/decrees, unhealthy and hostile environment must be removed. Again the media either the state or the private need to practice professionally and responsibly according to the accepted and time tested principles of objectivity, balance and fairness.

In Ethiopia, the measures of good governance (accountability, transparency, rule of law, efficiency and effectiveness, consensus oriented, participation and equity and inclusiveness) are almost ignored in practice as evident from the study by Oertel (2004). Researches revealed that even if Ethiopia nominates itself as democratic and federal state, adopt new constitution, introduce multi-party system, and hold periodic election, the country never apply each of them in its history. For instance, the political system in Ethiopia consists of a multiparty democracy whereby the ruling party allows other parties to register, but it does not allow them to compete freely for political power. The same proportion of experts judged that the regional and local governments of Ethiopia are constituted under a one-party system where voters are assisted by the Government-managed electoral authority to support the election of the ruling party (Oertel (2004).

Besides, the country registers low level of economic development. Therefore, as the reports of World Bank and United Nations Development Program and different researches recommended for the development of the country, issues of good governance need be practiced by the government. On top of this, the efficacy of the new development and transformation plan primarily requires the application of the essence of good governance (Report of the Prime Minister reported to the parliament on the quarter of the year 2011).

Establishing and maintaining good governance and values of good governance requires combined efforts of media organizations, political parties, researchers, governmental and non-governmental institutions without which advancing the public concern and promoting a country's development would be impractical

Different forms of media, whether private owned or governments owned, are responsible for covering issues of good governance and imparting relevant information on the issues to the public. In this regard Norris argues that: "The channels of the news media can function to promote government transparency, accountability and public scrutiny of decision makers in power by highlighting policy failures maladministration by public officials, corruption in the judiciary, and scandals in the corporate sector." (2006:2)

However, whether the media are playing their role effectively remains a subject of scholarly debate on different issues that signifies the practice of good governance and issues or values of good governance. This may be evident from the study by Yonas (2009) which revealed that both the state and privately owned media in Ethiopia had failed to give prominence coverage to democratic values and good governance. Gerring (2005) underlined that the quality of governance influences the propensity of democracy. . And hence, mass media can play a significant role to inform the publics about the plans and practices of the government in order to develop the culture of transparency and accountability.

### **Mass Media and Governance: any relationship?**

One of the great men, Thomas Jefferson ,who ruled United states of America said that were he left to choose between government and mass media he would prefer the latter. Jefferson's aphorism not only brought to reckoning the fact that mass media and governance are inseparable, it also calls the memory the match talked about watch dog functions of the mass media.

Perhaps using the institutional approach ,at the peripheral level, one can easily conclude that the relationship between the mass media and governance is like a vein diagram in which governance is at the extreme left and mass media at the extreme right both straddling society at the center. Mass media and governance straddles society because they exist within society and they are given definitive form(s), shape(s), and meaning(s) by the society. In essence, media practice is dependent on the type of society. A society that favors mediocrity will have media practice that savors in subjugating the truth.In such a society, objectivity, fairness and accuracy will not be upheld.

The system theory preaches the interdependence of structures within a system and that these structures exist to maintain and sustain the others. In essence, the mass media exists to provide equilibrium within the society so that each structure making-up the society knows its duty as well as harmonize its existence for the good of other structures. This function of the media can be found in the macro analytical function of the mass media that is surveillance, correlation, linkage, transmission of values and entertainment function. However, it needs stressed that without a free and independent mass media, attaining the objective of governance will be a wish full thinking. In this era of globalization, the mass media have a greater role to play in governance.

The more government transactions and operations are transparent, visible and open to scrutiny, the more feasible it is to express, deter and contain bad governance. There is no doubt that the mass media are best suited in the performance of aforesaid roles. The place of the mass media in governance is pivotal that even the country's constitution and its Press law have said a lot despite there are so many gaps in its practices.

To illustrate the notion, the Press Proclamation 34/1999 is the first legislation in the history of Ethiopia's legal system dealing with specifically the private press. As reflected in the preamble, the press

proclamations meant to enable the press play its role by providing favorable conditions under which the press could operate freely and responsibly. "...free press, not only provides a forum for Citizens to freely express their opinions, but also plays a preeminent role in the protection of individual and peoples' rights and the development of democratic culture as well as in affording citizens the opportunity to form a balanced views on various topical issues and to forward their opinions on the directions and operations of government".

Another perspective of the indispensability of the mass media in governance is the view of the mass media as then Fourth Estate of the Realm. This perspective is premised on the role of the mass media in the checking of the three other Estate Realms –the Executives, Legislative and Judiciary –and ensuring that these autonomous governmental realms do not become dictatorial and their constitutionally defined and respective societal roles are done right and not perfunctorily.

Questions arising from the roles of the mass media (discussed earlier) include:

- 1) Can it be said that the mass media have performed the aforesaid functions in Ethiopia?
- 2) Can it be said that the mass media have abdicated their roles in the face of contending nexus of socio-economic, cultural, political, familial and fraternal factors in Ethiopia?

These questions are best answered by evaluating the evolution of the mass media in Ethiopia.

### **Evaluating current status of mass media in Ethiopia**

The present role of the mass media in Ethiopia is best anchored on their historical development. The contributions of mass media in Ethiopia can be described as a "mixed blessing", i.e there are positive and negative contributions. While it is hard to conclude that their positive contributions outweighs their negative ones and vice versa, many internal and external problems have plagued the nation's media. The problems range from harsh economic environment, harsh political and social environment harassments, closure, outright ban law intimidation, assassination, poor professionalism, poor remuneration system, decree (state of emergency) unfriendly legal environment, ownership, manipulation, incompetence and poor adherence to professional and ethical standard. All these have contributed in small measure to the almost lack of purpose of the Ethiopian mass media. For instance, the government owned mass media is premised on not biting the fingers that feed them. This translated to mean that the mass media watch dog role is compromised and substituted with the docile, friendly and human dog role, even in the face of wrong doings by the fingers.

Again many privately owned media organizations that are supposed to be critically constructive and unbiased in their views have been compromised by ownership influence or sectional interest. In most cases, these owners are either friend of the government, contractors, or simply business men who have subjugated the social institutional status of the mass media to purely business interest. Rather than to mirror truth and national integration, the country's mass media have allowed to ethnicity, coloring of facts, parochialism, ownership influence, incompetence, bribery and corruption that influence journalists profession and judgment. Albeit, these problems are more prevalent in government owned media organizations than the privately owned ones.

Amid that decade a Plethora of new magazines and papers showed up on Ethiopian stands. A paper exhibited by Bereket Simon, (the then Minister of Communication Affairs Office) in 2006 upheld this thought. He expressed that "the numbers of media particularly in print are getting high after the underwriting of the bill in 1992 and the Ethiopian constitution has given much right for the general population to utilize their privilege of opportunity of expression in any respects.

Notwithstanding, from soonest period to the present one tyrant have been normal all through the Ethiopian history. Whatever press existed amid the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie I (1930-74) and the accompanying fascism carried on, with a couple of exemptions, such as eager mouthpieces for the rulers. Aadland and Fackler (1999) underlined that exclusive amid the 1990s have just indications of the rise of a free and autonomous press developed.

All the more gravely, the Press freedom in Ethiopia declined in 2014 as the government launched a crackdown on journalists and bloggers ahead of the May 2015 elections. Among those arrested were six members of the Zone 9 blogging collective who regularly wrote on issues of human rights and governance. The current regime (EPRDF) has used the draconian antiterrorism law to stifle dissent, targeting both print and online journalists, with some prosecuted in absentia. Others faced charges such as defamation. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) report Ethiopia was the second-worst jailer of journalists in Africa, after Eritrea CPJ (Committee to Protect Journalists retrieved from <https://cpj.org/reports/africa/ethiopia/> accessed on June 5, 2017.

### **Conclusion**

The mass media have an important role to play in governance is not in doubt, however critical examination of the development of mass media in Ethiopia showed that their present role which at best can be described as not too impressive, particularly in governance is as a result of their evaluation.

As it is noted earlier the mass media are amplifying factors in the society that inform the people about

happenings in and around them. This means that the media are society's mirror that reflects the government to the governed and vice versa.

From the two past autocratic regimes till now, Ethiopian mass media have been enmeshed with the vicissitudes of governance. It is therefore the position of this paper that much of the mass media cannot afford to be a loaf from the vicissitudes of governance; they should simultaneously strictly define their roles within the vicissitudes and not be entangled and encased as a result of their inability to define their stand

The mass media should be up and alive to its inalienable responsibility as the Fourth Estate of Realm, the guardian of the peoples' rights, liberty and freedom. The submission of this works that since the government and the governed have seen the role of the mass media as one that can be dispensed with, there should be an urgent need for the mass media to reassess their roles and relevance to the society

It is hereby recommended that the mass media practice the guide dog role because the watch dog role is perceived as meddlesomeness by with the government and the governed. Since the guide dogging not only gives the people news and information but also help them do their job citizens. It does not watch the environment but also actually challenge the people to get engaged and take ownership of the problem of the society. It does not position the people as spectators but as active participants in the societal problems and success.

## References

- Aadland, Ø. and Fackler, M. 1999. 'Ethiopia press, media, TV, radio and newspapers [www.pressreference.com](http://www.pressreference.com) Accessed on June5, 2017).
- Ahuja, B.N(1997) *Theory and Practice of Journalism*, India: Surjet Publications
- Article XIX .1999. The Public's Right to Know: Principles on Freedom of Information Legislation <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/standards/righttoknow.pdf> accessed on June 7, 2017
- Benz, A(2004), *Einleitung: Governance-Modebgriffoder nuzliches Sozialwissen-Schaftliches Konzept inGovernance-Regienen in Koploxe Regelystement: Eine Eihfuhurg*. Edited by A. Benz QWiesbaden: vs velag fur Sozial Wissenschaften.
- Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) <https://cpj.org/reports/africa/ethiopia/> accessed on June5, 2017
- Fukuda-Parr, S and Ponzio, R (2002) "Governance: Past, Present, Future: Setting the Governannace, Governannace@gdrc.org
- Gerring, J Strom C. Thocker, Carola Moreno.(2005) "Centripetal Democratic Governance: A Theory and Global Inquiry." *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 99. The American Political Science Association.
- Lasswell, H(1948) "The Structures and Functions of Communication in Society", in L. Bryson(ed). *The Communication of Ideas*, New York, Harper.
- Mackay, H and O'Sullivan, T.(ed)(1999) *The Media Reader: Continuity and Transformation*, London: Sage Publications.
- McQuail, D(2000), *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, London: Sage Publications.
- Mendelssohn, S(1996), *Mass Communication*, New Haven; CT: College and University Press.
- Norris, P. & Odugbemi, S. (2009). Do the News Media Act as Watchdogs, Agenda-setters and Gate-keepers? <http://www.fair.org/media-woes/officialagenda> accessed on June5, 2017
- Peters, B. G. and J. Pierre. 1998. "Governance without Government? Rethinking Public Administration." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, Vol. 8.
- S, Oertel (2004). *Governance Profile of Ethiopia*. retrieved on June 5, 2017 from <http://www.uneca.org>
- Schramm, W and Learnere, D(ed)( 1976) *Communication and Change, USA: The University Press of Hawaii*
- Treib, O et al(2005) "Modes of Governance :A Note towards Conceptual Clarification", *European Governance Paper*, Eurogov, <http://www.connect-network.org/euro/gov>.
- UNDP, *Human Development Report (2002) Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press
- UNESCO, *Media and Good Governance (2005)* The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization 7, Place de Fonenoy, 75332, Paris, France.
- World Bank (1992) *Policy Papers on Governance: OECD DAC 1996 WDR 1997*
- Wright, C.R.(1975) *Mass Communication: A Sociological Perspective*: New York: New York Random House.
- Yonas Tafese.(2009). *Coverage of Democratic Issues in Addis Neger and Addis Zemen*. Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University