



● Measuring Government Responsiveness in Ethiopia:

Implications for Countering Disinformation



Published as part of Meedan's Check Global initiative.

August 2023, InformAfrica

Measuring Government Responsiveness in Ethiopia: Implications for Countering Disinformation

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Published as part of the Global Check initiative by Meedan

August 2023
Inform Africa

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Published by **Inform Africa: Hub of Digital Rights Technology, Media Research and Development**

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Abstract

The spread of disinformation in Ethiopia has become a major concern, fueled by gaps in reliable and timely information from government offices. This research aimed to assess the responsiveness of government offices in Ethiopia and examine its implications for countering disinformation. A mixed methods approach combined a survey of 15 journalists, expert interviews, and a review of government office communication practices. The findings revealed limited responsiveness by government offices, including reluctance to provide information to media, lack of timely briefings, favoritism toward state-affiliated media, and absence of robust communication infrastructure. This information gap enables the proliferation of disinformation when reliable data is scarce. The study recommends improving government communication through centralized data systems, enhanced social media engagement, regular press briefings, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. Greater government transparency and open communication are essential to curbing disinformation. Further research could explore causes of limited responsiveness and engage government office perspectives. This study concludes that government responsiveness in providing accurate information is critical to countering disinformation in Ethiopia.

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Chapter One

Introduction

In Ethiopia's rapidly evolving media landscape, the role of journalists and media outlets has become increasingly pivotal. These entities are not just channels for disseminating news but play a crucial role in shaping public opinion, fostering a culture of transparency, and holding authorities accountable in a society that is navigating the complex waters of governance and democracy.

However, the pathway to accessing verified and timely information, a cornerstone of journalistic integrity, is riddled with challenges. The crux of the problem lies in the uncooperativeness of government offices, which have been less than forthcoming in providing necessary information to journalists and media outlets. This research delves deep into these challenges, aiming to shed light on the existing gaps and proposing ways to bridge them for a healthier information ecosystem in Ethiopia.

To understand the gravity and nuances of the issue, it is essential to trace the roots of information dissemination in Ethiopia, a country with a rich history of governance and bureaucracy. Government offices, traditionally the primary source of official information, have a significant role to play in this ecosystem. Their cooperation, or lack thereof, with media entities, can significantly influence the narrative and the information that reaches the public.

Article 29 of the Ethiopian Constitution guarantees citizens the right to access information. This right encompasses the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information in various forms, including oral, written, artistic, or through other media. Despite this constitutional guarantee, the practical implementation of information access remains a challenge.

In 2008, the Ethiopian Parliament enacted the "Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation No. 590/2008." This law explicitly states that all persons have the right to seek, obtain, and communicate information held by public bodies. However, the law was repealed in 2021, giving way to the "Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021." While this new law upholds the media's right to gather, receive, and disseminate news or information, it lacks detailed procedures for protecting the right to access information held by public bodies.

Over the past five years, the landscape of communication offices within the Ethiopian government has undergone significant transformations. These changes aim to enhance

the government's information dissemination and interaction with the public. Despite these efforts, challenges persist, particularly in the realm of digital communication and data management.

This research, therefore, embarks on a critical analysis of the existing information dissemination mechanisms in government offices, identifying the bottlenecks and exploring potential avenues for improvement. The objective is clear: to foster a collaborative environment where government offices and media entities work hand in hand, ensuring the flow of accurate and timely information to the public, thereby nurturing a well-informed society grounded in facts and transparency.

In this endeavor, we will scrutinize the existing systems and processes through a meticulous lens, drawing from firsthand experiences and accounts of journalists who navigate this terrain daily. By bringing to the fore the ground realities, this research aspires to be a catalyst in initiating a dialogue towards reform, encouraging a synergy between government bodies and media outlets, and paving the way for a society where information is not just a privilege but a right accessible to all.

Methodology: A meticulous methodology was employed to unravel the intricacies of the challenges faced by journalists in accessing information from government offices in Ethiopia. This research leveraged both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gather a rich and diverse set of data that paints a comprehensive picture of the current landscape.

Respondent Description

The primary respondents in this research were journalists and media personnel who have had firsthand experiences interacting with Ethiopian government offices. These individuals come from diverse backgrounds, bringing a wealth of experience and perspectives to the table. Their insights form the backbone of this research, providing a deep understanding of the ground realities.

Data Collection Method

The data collection was grounded in a two-pronged approach:

Surveys: Structured surveys were administered to a select group of journalists and media personnel. These surveys were designed to capture detailed responses on the experiences and challenges faced in accessing information from government offices.

Interviews: In-depth interviews were conducted with seasoned journalists who have navigated the complex bureaucratic landscape. These interviews provided a platform for

the respondents to share detailed narratives of their experiences, offering a rich tapestry of insights into the nuances of the issue at hand.

This dual approach ensured a holistic understanding of the challenges, capturing not only the broad trends but also the subtle nuances that define the journalists' experiences in Ethiopia. The data collected was then analyzed meticulously to identify patterns, challenges, and potential areas for improvement, setting the stage for a detailed exploration in the findings section.

1.1. Context into the Ongoing Sociopolitical Dynamics

The Ethiopian media landscape has been plagued by disinformation, particularly on social media platforms. This has contributed to the polarization of socio-political and ethnic lines within the country. The spread of disinformation often follows events and trends in Ethiopia's socio-political realities. In recent years, Ethiopia has experienced significant instability and violence, partly fueled by the circulation of dissident messages on social media platforms.

The government has also used state-affiliated media outlets to disseminate its narratives and information. However, polarized statements across media platforms have made it challenging to filter out what is real. The lack of information from the government has contributed to the spread of disinformation and its consequences, such as crises and conflicts. Only some independent news outlets have been able to provide accurate information continuously.

The spread of disinformation is often related to socio-political events like conflicts, violence, elections, political crises, and regional disputes. The Ethiopian government's responsiveness and implication in countering disinformation in these situations are essential for promoting accurate and reliable information in the Ethiopian media landscape.

Ethiopia has experienced significant political and regional tensions in recent years. These conflicts have given rise to the rapid dissemination of disinformation, mainly on social media. For example, recurrent intercommunal conflicts have occurred in the Oromo Special Zone and the North Shewa Zone of the Amhara region. These areas are diverse, with ethnic Oromos predominantly inhabiting the Oromo Special Zone and ethnic Amharas predominantly inhabiting the North Shewa Zone. During these conflicts, a lack of information from the government led to the spread of disinformation on social media platforms.

In November 2020, a war broke out between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian government after the former launched a "preemptive attack" on the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) bases in Tigray. During the conflict, both the TPLF and the Ethiopian government deliberately released propaganda content in the media, leading to increased disinformation.

The sixth Ethiopian election, held in June 2021, witnessed the spread of disinformation before, during, and after election day. Cross-boundary disputes between Sudan and Ethiopia have also been a cause for the spread of disinformation on social and mainstream media.

This research investigates the responsiveness of Ethiopian government offices and their implications in countering disinformation.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The digital age, characterized by the proliferation of social media platforms, has significantly impacted the dissemination of information. While this has democratized access to information, it has also given rise to challenges such as disinformation. This section offers a comprehensive review of existing literature focusing on the role of government offices, the media, and public perception in the spread and control of disinformation. It critically evaluates the existing body of work and identifies gaps that this research aims to fill.

Government offices play a pivotal role in shaping public perception and controlling the spread of disinformation. Studies, such as those by Smith and Johnson (2019), have highlighted that a lack of transparency and accountability in government operations can create fertile ground for disinformation. Opaque policies and decision-making processes can lead to the proliferation of conspiracy theories and false narratives.

The European Commission's 2018 initiative is a noteworthy example of a multi-dimensional approach to combat disinformation. It emphasizes the importance of transparency and the provision of accurate information from government offices. The initiative also calls for the enforcement of laws and regulations that hold disseminators of false information accountable.

The media serves as both a gatekeeper and amplifier of information. The absence of reliable information from government offices can compel media outlets to rely on

unverified or speculative sources. This can result in the spread of disinformation, as noted by Williams and Thompson (2020), who argue that the media's dependency on sensational stories can sometimes overshadow the need for factual accuracy.

Public trust is a critical factor in the effective control of disinformation. A study by Davis and Lee (2018) found that the absence of reliable and accurate information from government offices can erode public trust. This lack of trust can, in turn, make individuals more susceptible to disinformation. Therefore, building trust through transparency, accountability, and public engagement is crucial for any disinformation counter-strategy.

The concept of responsiveness—defined as the ability of government offices to provide timely and adequate responses—is gaining traction in academic circles. This research employs various indicators, such as timeliness, completeness, accuracy, and accessibility, to evaluate government responsiveness. These indicators also include the capability of government agencies to detect, verify, and respond to disinformation effectively.

In summary, the literature underscores the importance of government transparency, media integrity, and public trust in combating disinformation. However, there is a noticeable gap concerning the effectiveness and implementation of these measures. This research aims to contribute to the literature by evaluating the efficacy of government offices in providing accurate information and being responsive to disinformation crises.

Chapter Three

Research Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of government offices' role and responsiveness in countering disinformation within the Ethiopian media landscape. The rationale for using a mixed-methods approach is to leverage the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research methods, thereby offering a more nuanced analysis.

The qualitative aspect of this research involves an extensive review of relevant literature, including academic articles, reports, and policy documents. This review aims to measure the responsiveness of government offices and their effectiveness in countering disinformation. The qualitative data will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and trends.

For the quantitative portion, the research employs a survey targeting government offices' online and offline media engagements. Questionnaires were designed and administered to assess the level of responsiveness and effectiveness of these offices. The data collected will be statistically analyzed to draw meaningful conclusions.

The research employs a specific set of criteria to select institutions for study. These criteria include the institution's relevance to the media landscape, their level of public engagement, and their direct association with disinformation countermeasures. The aim is to focus on institutions that have a significant impact on the Ethiopian media landscape.

Social Media Analysis

Social media accounts of selected government offices were studied to assess their level of engagement and information dissemination. Metrics such as frequency of posts, engagement rates, and the timeliness of information provided were analyzed to evaluate their effectiveness in countering disinformation.

Ethical Considerations

All survey and questionnaire participants were informed about the purpose of the research and provided consent before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

Limitations

While the mixed-methods approach offers a comprehensive view, it is not without limitations. The research is constrained by the availability of data and the willingness of government offices to participate in the study.

Chapter 4

Access to Information and Government Communication

Constitutional Provisions

Article 29 of the Ethiopian constitution serves as a foundational pillar, guaranteeing every citizen the right to seek, receive, and impart information through various means, including orally, in writing, in the form of art, or through any media. This constitutional provision is not merely a legal formality but serves as the bedrock for other legislative measures aimed at operationalizing this right. However, the effectiveness of this constitutional provision in the real world remains a subject of scholarly debate and public discourse.

Legislative Measures: Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation No. 590/2008

To give practical effect to the constitutional guarantee, the Ethiopian parliament enacted this groundbreaking legislation. The law is comprehensive, detailing citizens' rights to access information held by public bodies. It specifies the right to be informed whether a public body holds a record containing the requested information and outlines the various means by which such information can be obtained, including inspection, taking extracts and notes, and obtaining certified copies or electronic records. Despite its comprehensive nature, the law has faced challenges in its implementation, leaving gaps in the public's ability to access crucial information.

Recent Amendments and Gaps: Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021

This new law introduced significant changes but also left gaps, particularly concerning the procedures for protecting the right to access information held by public bodies. Unlike its predecessor, the new law lacks detailed guidelines, creating a legal vacuum that could be exploited to limit access to information with argument is that access to information could be better addressed through separate, specialized legislation rather

than being included in the media law. This would allow for a more comprehensive and detailed framework specifically focused on access to information. Even the task force assigned to draft the law has concluded its assignment working on separate proclamation it is still pending in the legislative process of the country.

The Evolution of Government Communication

Initially established in 2008 through the Council of Ministers Regulation 158/2008, the Government Communication Affairs Office was directly accountable to the Office of the Prime Minister. Its primary objective was to ensure a smooth flow of information between the government and the public (Shimlis Mulatu, 2023). The office saw a succession of leaders, including Bereket Simon, Rewan Hussein, Getachew Reda, Negeri Lencho (PhD), and Ahmed Shide, each bringing their own approach to government communication, thereby affecting the office's effectiveness and public trust.

In November 2018, the Government Communication Affairs Office was dismantled, giving way to the establishment of the Press Secretariat department within the Office of the Prime Minister. This new entity assumed responsibility for orchestrating communication and information between the government and the public and provided periodic press briefings about the government's activities.

A noteworthy trend that emerged after 2018 was the rapid adoption of digital communication channels, especially social media platforms, by various government offices. Federal entities established a digital presence on platforms like Facebook, enabling them to publish information across social media platforms.

Established in October 2021, this new service operates under the authority of the Prime Minister's Office and aims to streamline the dissemination of government-related information. However, its operational guidelines and objectives are not yet fully functional, raising questions about its effectiveness and transparency.

Chapter 5

Discussion, Analysis, and Findings

5.1. The Trend of Disinformation on the Ethiopian Media Landscape

Disinformation usually intensifies during intense socio-political incidents across the country. When events occur, false claims and unverified information circulate in the Ethiopian media landscape.

For instance, when a controversy arose within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the dissemination of disinformation intensified.

These include reports of churches being burnt in Addis Ababa after the appointment of 26 bishops by Abune Sawiros, Archbishop of South West Shoa, without the recognition of the Holy Synod of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

False claims of weapons being found at Orthodox churches and the houses of church leaders have also been propagated on social media.

For instance, HaqCheck, a local fact-checking initiative, investigated¹ a Facebook post sharing an image with a claim that smuggled weapons were found inside the premises of an Orthodox Church in Shashemene.



1

<https://haqcheck.org/false-the-image-does-not-show-weapons-found-inside-the-premises-of-an-orthodox-church-in-shashemene/>

A viral Twitter post appeared on Feb 5, 2023, sharing three images with a claim that illegal rifles and ammunition were discovered in the house of Abune Abraham, Archbishop of Bahir Dar and head of the Patriarchate Office of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. The post claimed that police retrieved five Kalashnikov rifles with 235 bullets during a search.

5.2. Lack of Information Aggravates Disinformation

One of the main reasons why disinformation circulates fast on the Ethiopian social media landscape is the lack of timely and sufficient information easily accessible to the media.

In Ethiopia, the government controls much of the information flow, and there needs to be more access to independent and reliable sources of information. This creates an environment where rumors, half-truths, and conspiracy theories can thrive, and disinformation can spread rapidly.

The lack of sufficient information from government offices exacerbated all the disinformation trends and messages. This lack of information creates gaps in knowledge that can be filled with disinformation, rumors, and propaganda. When people cannot access accurate and reliable information, they are more likely to believe and share disinformation, which can lead to confusion, mistrust, and even violence.

The lack of information also makes it difficult for journalists and media professionals to verify the accuracy of the information they receive and report on. This creates a situation where disinformation can be quickly disseminated without being fact-checked, leading to the spread of disinformation and the erosion of public trust in the media.

5.3. Limited Social Media Presence and Engagement

The Ethiopian government offices need more social media presence and engagement through which they can actively provide timely and sufficient information to the public.

Government offices' limited social media engagement is a cause for disinformation dissemination.

The use of social media platforms has been growing worldwide and in Ethiopia. There are close to seven million Facebook users in Ethiopia, according to Statista.²

Social media is often the source of disinformation, which can have serious consequences for the well-being of society and the country's stability.

By not actively engaging with citizens and providing them with timely and accurate information on social media, government offices are leaving a vacuum that can be filled by malicious actors seeking to spread disinformation.

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1312554/social-media-users-by-platform-in-ethiopia/>

The social and mainstream media claims on the Ethiopian media landscape are related to conflicts and violence, the economic situation, the border dispute with Sudan, and the country's relations with Sudan and Egypt.

The ministries of Foreign Affairs, Peace, Defense, Water, and Energy, and Finance are directly related to the claims made on the Ethiopian media platforms, as the allegations have to do with issues that are concerned with these ministries.

Nonetheless, these ministries were found to have fragile engagement on social media platforms.

The Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not have a working website. It has a verified Facebook page, and it is not active. The last post on the Facebook page was on Feb 8, 2023.^[3]

The Ministry has a WordPress [blog](#) and a verified Twitter account. It is active on Twitter and publishes and shares other posts on the platform.

The other government office that should be the concern of this research is the Ethiopian Ministry of Peace. The Ethiopian media landscape has been infested with disinformation and controversies that are related to ongoing conflicts in the country. Conflict and violence were among the main topics of information disorder.

The Ministry of Peace has a verified and active Facebook page. They share news reports on the activities of the ministry. However, the information they give on the Facebook account has nothing to do with ongoing events and claims. The content of their news stories seems like mere propaganda.

The Ministry of Peace doesn't have a working website or a verified Twitter account. There is an unverified [Twitter account](#) in the name of the Ministry. However, the account is inactive; its latest post was over a year ago.

The Ministry of Defense and the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) are the other government institutions that are expected to be more responsive in offering information on media platforms. They maintain an active and verified Facebook page, but it is unclear whether the Ministry of the Military administers the page.

The military and the ministry do not have any website or a Twitter account. They are non-existent on other social media platforms other than Facebook.

The Ethiopian media landscape, especially social media, has experienced false, unverified, and controversial information concerning the financial and economic situation.

The Ministry of Finance, which oversees the financial and economic aspects of the country, has an active and verified [Facebook page](#) and [website](#). Nevertheless, it does not have verified Twitter and Telegram accounts. Additionally, the information on the Facebook page and website does not give numerical and up-to-date data.

³ At the time this research was conducted in at the end of June 2023.

There have been controversial allegations over the Nile River, the great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), and the relations between Sudan, Egypt, and Ethiopia. Studies show that there were disinformation campaigns by Egypt and Ethiopia regarding GERD.

The Ethiopian Ministry of Water and Energy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are two government institutions whose domain of role is related to cross-boundary rivers and projects being constructed alongside.

The Foreign Ministry gives press briefings and issues press statements regarding the status of the GERD and Ethiopia's relations with the downstream riparian countries, particularly Egypt. However, the information was inadequate and did not address ongoing claims made by media outlets in Egypt and Sudan or by the countries' governments.

The Ministry of Water and Energy has an active and verified Facebook page. It also maintains a website. However, it does not have a Twitter account and does not offer timely updates regarding the issue of GERD and related claims.

The Government Communication Service, which is accountable to the Office of the Prime Minister, is the mouthpiece of the Ethiopian government. However, the ministry does not have a verified Facebook page or Twitter account. It seems the ministry maintains active but unverified Facebook and Twitter accounts. It doesn't have a website.

Government offices do not provide timely and sufficient information on social media platforms regarding ongoing issues. Respondents reported that the social media accounts of government offices only publish public relations and exaggerated content that is intended to construct the reputation of the institutions.

This lack of timely and sufficient information on social media has significant implications for the media's ability to report accurately. Social media has become a critical tool for journalists to access information and report on ongoing issues, and the lack of information from government offices can hinder their ability to do so.

Furthermore, the focus on public relations and exaggerated content on social media can create a false narrative that does not accurately represent the reality of the situation.

5.4. Public Offices Do not Provide Timely Briefings and Updates

The research finding reveals that there has been a decline in the provision of timely briefings and updates by public offices. In the past, the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Government Communication Service conducted press briefings regularly, with the Ministry providing briefings every two weeks to foreign and local media outlets.

The briefings were a vital channel for conveying important announcements, ongoing issues, and other significant events. They facilitated the dissemination of accurate and

reliable information but also provided an opportunity for journalists and media professionals to seek clarification and ask pertinent questions.

However, it has been observed that these offices have ceased or decreased to offer periodic press briefings, resulting in a lack of up-to-date information dissemination. This has left the media and the public without timely updates on important issues.

This shift in the practices of public offices has led to a decrease in the flow of crucial information to the public and the media. The absence of regular briefings and updates deprives media outlets of the latest developments in the country and various governmental matters.

Furthermore, it has been identified that other government offices also lack a structured system for providing timely press briefings.

This lack of timely briefings and updates has significant implications for the media's ability to report accurately and for the public to know what has been happening. Without regular updates, journalists and reporters may not be able to provide reliable and up-to-date information to the public.

5.5. No Digital and Integrated Database System

Ethiopia's lack of a centralized and up-to-date database system in Ethiopia has been a long-standing issue.

The research found out that the Ethiopian government offices do not have digital or online database systems.

In addition to lacking an online data system, the Ethiopian government does not have an integrated database system. The lack of a database system means that data is often scattered across different departments and offices, making it difficult to access and analyze.

Most of the ministerial offices of the Ethiopian government do not have a website or a category on their website where up-to-date data are stored. Many government offices in Ethiopia do not have websites or online portals where data can be accessed.

This makes it challenging for citizens and the media to access the information they need and makes them rely on unverified and outdated information.

The issue of data availability affects the media and journalism in Ethiopia. Journalists and reporters often struggle to access reliable and up-to-date information, making it difficult for them to report accurately on current events. Respondents said that there is a limited chance of getting required data online when they need information for their reporting.

“There are other means or alternatives [online data systems] to get information other than asking the people within the offices to give you information.” (Respondent, 2023, p. 3)

Of all the ministerial offices of the Ethiopian executive branch, the Ministry of Finance⁴ and the National Bank of Ethiopia (NBE)⁵ have some data systems on their websites.

However, the data on the websites of these two government offices are not up-to-date. Most of the time, they do not publish up-to-date data weekly, monthly, or quarterly.

Without a centralized system for storing and accessing data, it becomes difficult for the media to inform the public. This lack of transparency can lead to a lack of trust in the government and ultimately cause disinformation to disseminate at greater rates.

5.6. Limited Access to Information

5.6.1. Government Offices do not Give Information to the Media

According to the survey, almost all respondents reported limited access to information from government offices. They reported that they do not get enough information from government offices.

“I have been rejected. For example, I was doing a report about an alleged claim that churches were being burnt down in the outskirts of Addis Ababa, and the Addis Ababa Police Commission refused to give me information regarding the issue.” (Respondent 1)

The respondent was reporting on the issue and trying to investigate the case. He asked the Addis Ababa Police Commission to get information on the issue. However, the commission refused to give information and even to comment on the affair.

The lack of access to information hampers the ability of the media to investigate and report on issues of public interest.

“I received information that an area that was reserved for a park in Gerji [Addis Ababa] was given to a private college. [But] I dropped it because the Woreda officials denied me information.” (Respondent 3)

As demonstrated in the example given, when journalists and reporters attempt to investigate an issue, they often face resistance from government offices who refuse to provide information or even comment on the matter. This lack of cooperation can make it difficult for journalists to gather the necessary facts to report on the issue accurately.

5.6.2. Reporters Forced to Drop Inquiries

Media inquiries are often rejected by government offices, forcing journalists and reporters to drop their investigations or reports. According to the survey conducted by the researcher, respondents reported that they have attempted to investigate or report on cases but could not do so because government agencies refused to provide information.

⁴ <https://www.mofed.gov.et/>

⁵ <https://nbe.gov.et/>

The lack of cooperation from government offices leaves media outlets with incomplete information and unable to counter disinformation.

For example, one respondent reported that they were forced to drop a story about closed industrial parks because the news would be incomplete without information from government offices.

“Yes [I was forced to drop]. It was about closed industrial parks. The news would be incomplete without information from government offices.” (Respondent, 2023, p. 1)

Another respondent cited a case involving Ethiopian Airlines, where they could not file a story because they needed more information to continue the story. However, Ethiopian Airlines was not responsive despite multiple attempts.

“There have been cases like this. One story that comes to mind is related to Ethiopian Airlines. I was unable to file that story because I needed more information to continue the story. Ethiopian Airlines was not responsive despite multiple attempts.” (Respondent 6)

This helps disinformation to circulate unchecked and media outlets cannot counter disinformation. When journalists are unable to access reliable and up-to-date information, they may be forced to rely on incomplete or inaccurate information, which can lead to the circulation of disinformation.

5.6.3. Government Offices Favor State-affiliated Media Over Private

The government offices tend to favor state-affiliated media outlets over private or independent media organizations when providing information. Respondents reported that government offices give information only to government-affiliated media while denying information to private or independent media organizations.

For instance, one respondent reported that they asked the Information and Network Security Administration (INSA) for information on cryptocurrency but were unable to obtain it. However, the respondent said the same officials who denied them were seen giving interviews to state-affiliated media outlets like EBC and Fanabc.

“They give information only to government [-affiliated] media. I asked the Information and Network Security Administration for cryptocurrency information, but they could not give me. However, I have seen the same officials interviewing EBC and Fanabc.” (Respondent 5)

When government offices only provide information to state-affiliated media, private or independent media organizations become unable to access reliable and up-to-date information. This can lead to incomplete or inaccurate reporting.

This favoritism towards state-affiliated media has significant implications for the media's ability to report accurately and counter the circulation of disinformation on the Ethiopian media landscape.

5.6.4. Government Office Communication Officials are Reluctant

The public relations and communication officials of government offices are often reluctant to respond to media inquiries, according to a survey conducted by the research. Respondents reported that government officials often consider journalists as enemies and do not cooperate with them.

They are also often too busy to respond to media inquiries, with some officials telling journalists to call them later.

For example, one respondent reported that officials at the Addis Ababa Education Bureau officials were reluctant to respond to media inquiries, telling journalists to call them later.

“They are reluctant. They say things like ‘I am busy now, call me later’ etc. For example [officials at] Addis Ababa Education Bureau.” (Respondent 1)

Another respondent reported that very few officials respond quickly to media inquiries, with most of them considering journalists as enemies.

“Very few respond quickly. In fact, most of them consider a journalist as an enemy.” (Respondent 3)

They do not give [information] most of the time. This is because they wrongly understand that the private media only report their failures but not their good works.” (Respondent 5)

5.6.5. Journalists Get Rejected when They Ask for Information

The research findings indicate a significant trend of government offices often refusing to provide information to journalists and media seeking it.

The respondents in the study shared their experiences of being rejected by public offices numerous times when requesting information. They had been rejected by public offices many times when they asked for information.

The denial of access to information was reported across various government departments and agencies.

Respondents reported that various government offices had denied them information repeatedly. One of the respondents mentioned that they had faced repeated rejections from various government offices.

“Various government offices have denied me information on several occasions.” (Respondent 2)

Another respondent specifically highlighted ministries and service providers such as electricity as being unresponsive to inquiries, and the situation in the area of security institutions was even worse.

“I have been denied information by government agencies many times. For example, ministries and service providers such as electricity do not respond [to inquiries]. The situation in the area of security institutions is even worse.” (Respondent 3)

An example was provided by a respondent who described being denied information by the Ministry of Innovation and Technology. They sought information about an E-government project implemented by the ministry, including details about the project's budget, the software and networking involved, and the contractor's origin (whether local or international). However, the ministry refused to disclose this information.

“Yes, we have been denied information many times. For example, we asked the Ministry of Innovation and Technology for information about an E-government project the ministry was implementing. We repeatedly asked for information on the amount of budget they spent to implement the project, who made the software and networking of the system, and whether the contractor is local or international, and the ministry refused to give us information.” (Respondent 4)

Another respondent shared their experience of being denied information by the Ministry of Finance regarding Ethiopia's debt stock and devaluation of the currency.

“Yes, from November 2022 to March 2023, I was denied information by the Ministry of Finance about Ethiopia's debt stock and devaluation of the currency.” (Respondent 5)

Furthermore, a respondent highlighted multiple government entities as being particularly uncooperative, including the National Bank of Ethiopia, Ethio telecom, Ethiopian Airlines, the Ministry of Defense, and more recently, the Ministry of Mines. Over a span of three years, this respondent encountered repeated instances of non-responsiveness from these ministries.

Despite using various means of communication such as email, phone calls, and even visiting the offices with a formal letter, they failed to obtain any response.

“Yes, [I was denied information] plenty of times. The biggest offenders in my opinion are the National Bank of Ethiopia, Ethio telecom, Ethiopian Airlines, The Ministry of Defense, and more recently the Ministry of Mines. The times vary but happened over the past three years on many different occasions. I was covering stories related to the Ministries mentioned and couldn't get a response despite emailing, calling, and even going to the offices with a letter in hand.” (Respondent 6)

This indicates a widespread problem of journalists and media outlets being rejected and denied access to information when approaching government offices. The accounts provided by the respondents shed light on the lack of transparency and cooperation in various sectors of the government, hindering journalists' ability to report on important issues.

Without access to reliable and up-to-date information, journalists may be unable to provide accurate reporting, leading to the circulation of disinformation.

5.7. Incompetency and Bureaucracy (Red Tape)

The government offices are hindered by a lack of efficient systems for collecting, categorizing, and organizing information, according to the survey. This lack of organization can make it difficult for officials to provide information to journalists in a timely and accurate manner.

Many layers of bureaucracy need to be overcome to obtain simple information. Government office representatives are also hesitant to share information because they are always looking for authorization from higher powers, in case the narrative they are putting out doesn't match the actual data they have.

Furthermore, the red tape or bureaucracy within government institutions is another problem that hinders the provision of information to the media. Respondents reported that government offices often have incompetent communication and public relations personnel who are unhelpful.

“It is difficult to get information from government offices. This is because they have really incompetent communication/public affairs personnel that are unhelpful. Most of the time, they have many layers of bureaucracy that need to be overcome to get simple information. Government office representatives are also hesitant to share information because they are always looking for authorization to share it from a higher power, just in case the narrative they are putting out does not match the actual data they do not have.” (Respondent 6)

5.8. Government Offices Aggravate Disinformation due to their Uncooperativeness

The fact that government offices don't provide information to the media exacerbates the problem of disinformation. Lack of information and delay in providing information from government offices to the media and the general public helps spread disinformation.

There is a perception among respondents that government offices contribute to the dissemination of disinformation by withholding information from the media and disseminating disinformation through government-affiliated media channels.

Respondents noted that the government is often late to respond and is always playing catch-up to counter misinformation after it spreads. They stated that by refusing or being unable to provide correct information quickly and openly, the government has pushed people to go to other sources to fill the information gap by refusing or being unable to provide correct information quickly and openly.

One respondent emphasized that government offices have failed to curb the proliferation of disinformation and instead hinder the flow of accurate information, particularly to the media sector. Their inability to provide timely and accurate information only adds to the problem of misinformation and disinformation, preventing the public from accessing reliable sources of information.

The respondent remarked:

“Government offices have not been able to stop the spread of disinformation. On the contrary, they are not providing accurate information, especially for the media sector, so they are contributing to preventing accurate information from reaching the people.”

(Respondent 4)

Another respondent highlighted the role the government should have played in combating disinformation by promptly providing information about its work and responsibilities. However, the government's delayed response and its reactive approach to countering misinformation have allowed disinformation to circulate freely. The government's refusal or inability to swiftly and openly provide correct information has compelled people to seek alternative sources to fill the information gap. The respondent expressed disappointment, stating:

“The government has [should have had] a big role in fighting disinformation by providing information on its work and duties on time. However, unfortunately, the government is late to respond and so is always playing catch to counter the misinformation after it spreads. Refusing or being unable to provide correct information quickly and openly has pushed people to go to other sources to fill the information gap.” (Respondent 6)

The lack of cooperation from government offices has worsened the issue of disinformation, impeding the dissemination of accurate information and inadvertently contributing to the circulation of disinformation. The government office's failure to proactively address this problem has led to a growing reliance on alternative sources for information.

5.9. Limited Information Alternatives for the Media

Research findings indicate that access to information is severely limited, leaving little room for alternative sources of information. This scarcity of information poses challenges for both media outlets and fact-checking organizations as they struggle to obtain diverse and reliable sources of information. Particularly concerning is the monopoly the government holds over the flow of information, particularly government-related information.

If government offices don't give information to media and fact-checking institutions, there is little chance that these institutions get another source of information. This impairs the capacity of media and fact-checking outlets to provide the public with sufficient information and verify claims.

To overcome this hurdle, journalists often turn to foreign media outlets, eyewitnesses, and subject-matter experts to gather information when they are denied access by government offices. Unfortunately, this reliance on external sources means that local media workers are constrained to reporting one-sided and incomplete information to their audience.

One respondent expressed this dilemma by stating:

"When I do not receive a response from the government, I have no choice but to report based solely on the information I receive from one side [perspective]." (Respondent 3)

This quote highlights the frustration of journalists face who cannot provide comprehensive and balanced coverage due to the limited availability of information.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

The research undertaken serves as an eye-opener to the myriad challenges that journalists in Ethiopia face when seeking information from government offices. These challenges, as detailed in the findings, range from the lack of timely briefings and updates to the absence of a centralized digital database system. Each of these issues contributes to an environment where the media's role as an information disseminator and a watchdog is severely compromised.

The decline in the provision of timely briefings and updates by public offices has a cascading effect that goes beyond the media. It impacts the general public, who often rely on journalists for accurate and timely information. In a society where information is power, the lack of it can lead to uninformed decisions, fuel rumors, and exacerbate the spread of misinformation.

Similarly, the absence of a centralized digital database system and the bureaucratic red tape encountered in government offices not only delay the reporting process but also raise questions about the reliability and credibility of the information being reported. This has a detrimental effect on the trust that the public places in media outlets, further eroding the democratic fabric of the society.

However, the objective of this research extends beyond merely cataloging these challenges. It aims to serve as a catalyst for change, sparking a dialogue among all stakeholders involved. The need for reform is urgent and requires a multi-pronged approach. Government offices must take the lead in becoming more transparent and efficient in their information dissemination. They should consider implementing digital database systems that are easily accessible to journalists and should strive for greater accountability in their interactions with the media.

On the other hand, media outlets and journalists are not mere bystanders in this scenario. They have a role to play in advocating for greater transparency and in holding government offices accountable for lapses in information dissemination. Media organizations can also collaborate with civil society to push for reforms that will make information more accessible.

In conclusion, the challenges are significant but not insurmountable. By identifying these bottlenecks, this research aspires to be a starting point for a broader conversation about reforming information dissemination mechanisms in Ethiopia. It is only through collective action, involving government offices, media entities, and civil society, that we can hope to build a more transparent, accountable, and democratic society.

Chapter 7 Recommendation

Based on the comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by journalists in Ethiopia in accessing information from government offices, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Implement a Centralized Digital Database System

Government offices should invest in creating a centralized digital database system that is regularly updated and easily accessible to journalists. This would streamline the information-gathering process and enhance the reliability of the information disseminated.

2. Regularize Briefings and Updates

Public offices must commit to regular briefings and updates, especially on critical issues that have a direct impact on public life. Scheduled press briefings can be a step in this direction, ensuring that journalists have timely access to essential information.

3. Foster Transparency and Accountability

Government offices should adopt a transparent approach in their operations, making it easier for journalists to access information. This could include publishing annual reports, financial statements, and other relevant data that could be of public interest.

4. Advocate for Legislative Reforms

Media organizations and civil society should collaborate to advocate for legislative reforms that make it mandatory for government offices to disclose information. This could be in the form of a Right to Information Act or similar legislation which is already pending in the table the cabinet of the prime minister.

5. Training and Capacity Building

Both government offices and media organizations should invest in training programs aimed at capacity building. For government officials, this could include training on the importance of transparency and the role of the media in a democratic society. For journalists, training could focus on ethical reporting and fact-checking.

6. Encourage Public Participation

Public forums and town hall meetings can serve as platforms for direct interaction between government offices, journalists, and the public. These forums can be used to disseminate information and address queries, thereby fostering a culture of openness.

7. Establish a Media-Government Liaison Office

A specialized office that serves as an intermediary between government offices and journalists could be established to facilitate smoother communication. This office could handle media queries, arrange interviews, and provide necessary documents, thereby streamlining the information flow. Recently, established government communication service might take the initiative to have the office in its structure.

By implementing these recommendations, it is hoped that the challenges identified in this research can be effectively addressed, leading to a more transparent and accountable information dissemination system in Ethiopia.