

Exploring Ethnic Hate Speech through the Prism of Social Media in Ethiopia

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Abstract: *The present case study is aimed at offering a snapshot analysis of the nature of ethnic hate speech and the strategies used in disseminating such speech via Facebook, and showing how Facebook followers are affected by such hate messages. In this study, four Facebook users known by the researchers to have high number of followers and known to post politics-related messages were selected using extreme case sampling. In the selection of potential ethnic hate messages, two social psychologists examined the messages and those agreed upon by both to have ethnic hate characteristics were selected for final analysis. Accordingly, eighty messages (written messages and comments given) and fifteen pictures with hate speech contents targeted towards specific ethnic groups were analyzed using media content analysis and discourse analysis. The findings indicated six categories of ethnic hate speech and four strategies used to frame them. The analysis also revealed that a substantial number of Facebook followers reacted to hate speeches in destructive, irrational, and polarizing manners. This paper finally proposes two major interconnected alternative approaches deemed necessary to counteract the cascading negative impacts of ethnic hate speeches.*

Key words: Facebook, hate speech, ethnic prejudice, ethnic violence, ethno-nationalism

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Introduction

Sixty-five years ago the famous social psychologist Gordon Allport contended that regardless of the role civilization played in helping people control the physical world, human beings appear to live in the Stone Age so far as their handling of human relations is concerned (1954). Later on, Chin (2004) noted that regardless of how people are technologically advanced, irrational perceptions about other people remain unchanged. In line with the idea of Allport (1954) and Chin (2004), prejudice and discrimination towards differences in race / ethnicity /gender / class / sexual orientation etc. are becoming a hub of friction in today's world. This is manifested in name-calling, prejudice, discriminatory acts, stereotypical beliefs, and when it gets to the worst, ethnic cleansing or genocide (Allport, 1954; Myers, 2010).

In Ethiopia, for example, we are observing a very rampant and dangerous sign of inter-ethnic prejudice and/or hate speech in multiple social media platforms, particularly *Facebook*. The unbridled pronouncements we observe in such social media are perhaps both sources and outcomes of the *politics of hate* that are predicated upon an *exaggerated politics of difference*. The latter has been legitimized through the political arrangement of *ethnic federalism* enshrined in the 1994 Constitution of the country, which essentially created a fertile ground for inter-ethnic competition and conflict. The

inter-ethnic feuds simmering for a long time finally led and continue to lead toward massive displacement of citizens across the country. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), for example, indicated that in 2018 Ethiopia outpaced any other country in the world, including Syria, in terms of the number of internally displaced people. Those who have left their home due to fear of violence between January and June 2018 alone are reported to be close to 1.4 million in number. It is currently estimated that close to 3 million people have been displaced in the country since the end of 2015 because of inter-ethnic tensions and violence (New African, 2019). These dislocations appear to have been exacerbated by ethno-nationalist hate speech spewed and fast circulated through such social media outlets as Facebook.

As the noted African academic, Mahamood Mamdani, accurately observed recently, “mobilization of ethnic militias [in Ethiopia] is on the rise. Paramilitaries or ethnic militias known as special police force, initially established as counter-insurgency units, are increasingly involved in ethnic conflicts, mainly between neighboring ethnic states” (2019, p.4) which in turn fueled broader inter-ethnic conflicts that led to massive dislocations mentioned earlier.

Many of the inter-group conflicts and accompanying internal displacements are fueled by hate speech, particularly those that are assisted by social media

including *Facebook* (Gagliardone, *et. al.*, 2014). Naturally, perhaps like elsewhere, a face-to-face expression of hate speech is a frowned-upon action and many people shy away from it perhaps due to legal and cultural norms. Instead, people who hold grudges and hatred opt to release their emotions and hate-filled attitudes indirectly, and, more recently using online systems. The online system is a preferred means to spread hate speech because of its higher and faster transmission capacity and giving perpetrators anonymity (Wibke, 2008). As such, social media platforms are found to be hot spots for hate speech (Mondal, *et. al.*, 2017). In this regard, as of January 2014, *Facebook* has 1.24 billion users, who, if they were to be counted as citizens of a defined territorial space, would comprise the third-fastest growing nation on the planet, after China and India (Gagliardone, *et. al.*, 2014). The number of *Facebook* users has been steadily increasing. The growth of the Facebook industry in the last 3 years is evident as the number of global *Facebook* users has been reported to have reached 2.3 billion by the end of 2017, according to *Internet live stat*. When looking at the number of *Facebook* users in Ethiopia, according to *Internet live stat*, which provides dynamic and timely statistics, there were about 4.5 million *Facebook* subscribers by 2017, with 4.2% penetration rate. If hate speech has a place in *Facebook* which it evidently does, it is easy to imagine the number of people it could affect.

Although the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Dr. Abiy Ahmed, very recently (at the time of writing this paper) reminded the Parliament that his government has started working on how to protect the public from hate speech, the problem still remains to be at the lower ebb of public attention and scrutiny. If the issue continues to be neglected and left unattended, a huge number of people in Ethiopia, including the Ethiopian Diaspora, who are using *Facebook* could be affected by the hatred and prejudicial messages of a small vocal extremist minority from across a spectrum of Ethiopia's ethnic mosaic. This paper is, therefore, designed to try to understand the flurry of hate speech bubbling almost hourly on online systems, particularly *Facebook*. The data analyzed are delimited to messages on *Facebook* merely because it is the most popular and broadly used social media in Ethiopia.

Statement of the Problem

Ethiopia is fast becoming an ethnically-cleaved assemble of desperate collections of people rather than a coherently organized society. That was probably why Mamdani, on his most recent opinion piece in the New York Times, spoke of how the Ethiopian leaders “had both Sovietized and Africanized Ethiopia” (2019). In other words, Mamdani is revealing how “every piece of land in Ethiopia was inscribed as the ethnic homeland of a particular group” (p. 5) similar to that of the old Soviet Republics and how “the country today resembles a quintessential African

system, marked by ethnic mobilization for ethnic gains” (p. 4). Following the official politicization of ethnicity in 1991 and the ascension of the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) to state power, the politics of *difference* took center stage and gradually descended into the creation of ethno-nationalist quagmire. Consequently, “Fears of Ethiopia suffering Africa’s next inter-ethnic conflict are growing” (Mamdani, 2019, p.4).

The daily escalation of ethnic violence in the country is being accentuated by ethnic hate speeches ground and circulated in social media. Hence, it appears that we live in an environment of heightened anxiety due to the preponderance of hate speech on media of all kinds as well as conflict-induced internal displacements. The Somali-Oromo conflict, the Sidama-Welayita conflict in Hawassa, the Oromo and the Amhara displacements from Kamashi Zone of Benishangul Gumuz, the Guji-Gedio conflict, Gamo victims around Burayu, and the conflict in Gurage zone are a few cases that were observed in the last year that captured the attention of the mass-media. However, this is the tip of the ice berg in that much of the ethno-nationalist prejudices, hate speeches, and the accompanying acts of unbridled violence remain lurking in every corner of the land away from the public view.

The multifaceted ethno-nationalist violence observed in the country appears to be galvanized by individuals and groups holding stakes and assisted by

online hate speech. Media outlets such as *Facebook*, help potential haters to easily spread their false information and hatred so that they secure followers. Noting this problem, the former president of Oromia Regional State, Mr Lemma Megersa, expressed his apprehension of the hate speech circulating in social media in the following ways: ‘ግለሰቦች በየመድረኩና በየመገናኛ ብዙሀን ህዝብ እንዲለያይ ከፍተኛ ጥረት እያደረጉ ስለሆነ...’ This may roughly be translated to ‘there are some individuals who are using different social media platforms to create rift between us’ (in a press conference, Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), September 18, 2018). Unless corrective and constructive measures are taken by all involved and concerned, hate speech could bring doom to this country. And, no time is more appropriate than now to investigate and understand it and ultimately take up the challenge and fight back.

With regard to Ethiopia, up until now, there is but limited literature to refer to in regard to the hate speech circulating in all kinds of platforms, particularly in Facebook, the leading online platform globally (Hawdon, *et al*, 2015). More importantly, this paper assumes that the nature and status of hate speech has not been thoroughly examined from a social psychological perspective, at least in the context of the current socio-political situation in Ethiopia. Nevertheless, the works of two scholars are worth mentioning here.

First is Hagos's recent work on the spread of hate speech in Ethiopia that reported how an ethnic group in Ethiopia is becoming the target of hate speech (2018). Yet, his work lacks a systematic examination of the nature (types, themes, or categories etc.) of hate speech. Understanding the nature of hate speech and identifying the different types would help us design appropriate measures needed to tackle the problem. In addition, while Hagos's work takes the general Facebook users into account, the study ignores the roles a few vocal extremists play in formulating and circulating hate message. It is also worth noting that the available literature on online hate speech has given little attention to the roles of few but powerful hate mongers in disseminating hate speeches and affecting their respective followers. Yet, this paper recognizes and acknowledges the enormous impact just few individuals are having on a huge number of followers.

Second, Kinfé (2017) in his paper '*Fake News' and Its Discontent in Ethiopia- a reflection*', has noted that the youth who are largely misinformed, emotional, and mostly unemployed are prone to be the target of hate speech and fake news. Kinfé frequently expresses the impact of fake news on the uninitiated when he states, '...at the hands of minors and hate mongers, the uncivilized internet is known for the unpalatable rogue web culture of spreading hatred and disinformation' (2017, p.1). While Kinfé reported the vulnerability of the youth to the negative impact of fake news, his

work fails to show the social psychological basis of how the youth are falling prey to a few hate mongers in the online platform. Hence, this paper assumes that understanding the social psychological basis of hate speech is of paramount importance and is a prelude to initiating action to combat it. This study, therefore, intends to explore the problem of hate speech as propagated through *Facebook* and understand its nature as well as the strategies used to galvanize *Facebook* users, and the ways *Facebook* users react to hate messages.

Limitations of the Study

This paper recognizes certain limitations. The first is that only contents written in Amharic and English languages are examined in this study. Other messages written in other Ethiopian languages were not examined. The second limitation relates to the *modus operandi* used to select hate messages. That is, in order to select contents for potential ethnic hate speech, manual searching was used scrolling down *Facebook* pages in which hate messages might have been left undetected. This could have limited the data to some extent. In addition, as hate speech could be disguised in many forms, the detection of sample contents for this study might not be free from false positives and false negatives.

Scope of the Study

In this study, only *Facebook* messages from four active *Facebook* users who have comparatively huge number of followers were considered. Hence, the

findings in this study may not reflect the general *Facebook* users in Ethiopia. In addition, as the time during which the data were collected was when the political stake was high in the country, any reference to this study should take this time frame into account.

Review of Related Literature

Defining Hate Speech

Hate speech is a broad and contested term to which we find no universal definition (UNESCO, 2015; Nadim and Fladmoe, 2016). As such, several definitions of hate speech exist in the literature and the concept continues largely to be used in everyday discourse as a generic term. The difficulty of adopting a universally accepted definition emanates from different interrelated factors. First, for many, adopting a definition of hate speech that is broad enough to capture emerging expressions and forms of communication is difficult. This is because hate speech could be camouflaged in many ways and forms (Palazzetti, *et. al.*, 2017). To epitomize this, Brown (2017) observed, *“the term ‘hate speech’ can be applied to countless permutations of relatively unlimited types of context, speech content, emotions, feelings, or attitudes, speakers, and activity. This suggests strongly to me that we are dealing with multiple meanings” (P. 3).*

Second, considering a message as hate speech is a decision that may incite a tug of war between those respecting the right

of freedom of expression on the one hand, and the duty and responsibility of protecting others from any kind of violence and crime on the other (Nadim and Fladmoe, 2016). It is, therefore, up to the person or organization that is to define the term to take decision on the contents of the definition, gearing to either side or striking a balance.

Third is, each country, regional and international organization, and internet intermediaries such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* give priority to their own ‘business’ and local realities while defining hate speech (UNESCO, 2015). In addition, there is also infiltration of political interests in defining hate speech (Wibke, 2008). As the result of these, an attempt to detect hate speech could beget false positives and false negatives. Nonetheless, multilateral treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) seem to have made reasonable decisions in defining its contours (UNESCO, 2015). To better conceptualize its meaning, we have presented, below, two working definitions:

- *‘Hate speech refers to words of incitement and hatred against individuals based on their identification with certain social or demographic characteristics. It may include but not limited to, speech that advocates, threatens, or encourages violent acts against a particular group, or expressions that foster a climate of prejudice and intolerance, which can lead to targeted attacks or persecution of*

that group through ‘othering’ processes’ (Gagliardone *et. al.*, 2014, p.5).

- ‘Hate speech is degrading, threatening, harassing or stigmatizing speech which affects an individual’s or a group’s dignity, reputation and status in society by means of linguistic and visual effects that promote negative feelings, attitudes and perceptions based on characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, sexual orientation, gender expression, gender identity and age’ (Ørstavik, 2015, p.12).

Online Hate Speech

Hate speech may be communicated in a number of ways including print media, electronic media, the mass media such as TV and radio, graffiti, and social media such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*. Online hate speech is a type of speech that takes place online. Even though, online spaces are helping the realization of democratic paradigms through facilitating debates and information flows and changing the nature of political engagement, the platform is also found to be a hot spot for rumors, false and dehumanizing hateful messages (Palazzetti *et. al.*, 2017). In addition to this, according to Hate base, a web-based application that collects instances of hate speech online worldwide, the majority of cases of hate speech target individuals based on ethnicity and nationality (Winiewski, *et.al.* 2017).

Because of its relatively low cost and its potential for immediate revival, hate speech can stay online for a long time.

Hate speech online can be itinerant. Even when content is removed, because it involves multiple actors, it may find expression elsewhere. In addition, the internet facilitates anonymous and pseudonymous discourse, which can lead people to say things they probably would never dare to say in the public space (Citron and Norton, 2011). As such, among the different forms of online platforms, *Facebook* appears to be the most preferred one, followed by *YouTube* (Hawdon, *et. al.*, 2015). While we recognize the enormous positive contributions of online systems to improving the human condition, we at the same time, acknowledge the challenges such systems pose to society. As common sense teaches us, any new technology and/or system is as good as the user. We can use it properly or abuse it entirely.

Causes of Hate Speech

The causes of hate speech are myriad and complex. Only significant ones discussed in the literature are summarized here. The first one is historical revisionism and historical negation. Evidences show that conflict between different social groups can be caused by disagreement on the historical relation of the desperate groups. Historical revisionism is when a group re-interprets historical records- as a means to challenge the established views held by mainstream scholars. Historical negation occurs because of distortion and denial of historical records (Škorić, and Bešlin, 2017).

The second category of cause for ethno-nationalist hate speech can be understood by relating it to the tensions and strains that ensue during competitive times. The climate for hate speech is likely to become more conducive in situations where the political stakes are high, such as during elections or when undergoing regime change, or often when faltering economic growth ensues, high levels of poverty and unemployment, perceived deprivation, unequal status between groups, and when competition over scarce resources such as power is high (Mondal, *et.al.*, 2017).

Another cause of hate speech is personality differences. Here, anti-social personality disorder is a case in point. As defined by *DSM-IV-TR*, anti-social personality disorder, also called sociopath, is a pervasive pattern of irresponsible behavior and disregard for the rights of others that are typical characteristics of people who repeatedly engage in unlawful and/or reckless behavior (In Andrasik, 2006). As such, people with anti-social personality disorders, are more likely to engage in insulting and derogating others (Livesley, 2001).

Consequences of Hate Speech

The consequences of hate speech are serious and far-reaching. Hate speech separates and excludes the victims from the community of humankind, dehumanizes and denigrates the victim group (s) and begins a continuum of destruction (Wibke, 2008). History is full

of records pertaining to the role hate speech played in major conflicts, violence and crimes of different forms. For example, the genocide against Jews in Germany in the 1940s, the 1994 Rwandan genocide, and the lost lives and the internal displacements of the Kenyan 2007/8 post-election traumatic events are reported to have been preceded and facilitated by hate speech messages in different platforms (Chin, 2004; Waldon, 2014).

Hate-fueled discourse can incite violence because of the way it frames historical events or creates myths that propagate negative sentiment against particular groups (Gagliardone, *et.al.* 2014). Hate speech also lets in-groups adopt a particular ideology and helps to recruit or organize members through the construction of a *common enemy myth*, which is constructed as a threat to the in-group. Hate speech can, therefore, serve as an effective tool to intimidate outgroups who are targeted and promote violence and intolerance. Likewise, hate speech could also be used as a means to repress government opponents and, therefore, perpetuate and entrench the subordination of others (Nadim and Fladmoe, 2016). The latter has been publicly demonstrated in Ethiopia recently by the demonization of government opponents.

Responses to Hate Speech

In response to hate speech, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial

Discrimination, to which Ethiopia is a signatory, in its Article 4 calls all parties to condemn and criminalize all attempts to justify or promote racial hatred in any form (UN, 1965). Yet the legal framework regarding hate speech varies from country to country. Some value free expression at any cost, while others formulate a tight rule and law for the prevention of hate speech.

However, users of social networks like *Facebook* are subject not only to national law, but also to the terms of use set up by the companies owning the platforms where they choose to express themselves (Gagliardone, *et.al.*, 2014). Facebook's terms, at least officially, also forbid content that is harmful, threatening and that has the tendency to stir hatred and incite violence (Palazzetti *et. al.*, 2017). At a time when popular movements against governments become overwhelming and get emboldened by the use of such media as *Facebook*, as happened in the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 or in Ethiopia beginning from 2015, incumbent governments resort to repeatedly turn off the *Internet*, an illusive and elusive tactic that simply does not work!

Methods

Research Design: In this study, an in-depth understanding of the issue of 'how a few but powerful *Facebook* users are disseminating ethnic-based hate speech is sought. To this end, a *case analysis approach* in the tradition of what is generally referred to as *interpretivism*,

was adopted as a design for the research (Creswell, 2013).

Sample and Sampling Techniques: In this study, four *Facebook* users who are well known to have been engaged in posting ethnic-related and politically motivated messages were selected using *extreme case sampling*. The number of followers for the "most popular" user from among the four was 141,017 while for the "least popular" one it was 86,534. The remaining participants have followers between the two figures. These four participants use their real photos and names (except one who uses a known nick name but real photo) in their *Facebook* accounts.

Sample Content Identification: an important thing to consider is the types of content to be selected for analysis. Detecting hate speech message was done through the use of a tri-dent approach. First, in this study, a message is considered an 'ethnic hate speech' if it fulfils one or more of the following criteria. Hate speech includes any message in the form of words or pictures shared via Facebook (or made public) with the express purpose of:

- *insulting, derogating, or dehumanizing members of another ethnic group (Waldon, 2014);*
- *depicting members of another ethnic group as a threat to in-groups (Mondal, et. al., 2017);*
- *spreading, inciting, promoting or justifying ethnic hatred (UN, 1965);*

- *calling for actions to attack or intimidate members of out-groups* (UNESCO, 2015);
- *triggering intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and/ or ethnocentrism* (Council of Europe, 1997).

Second, using the criteria mentioned above, 120 messages (100 in the form of words and 20 pictures) posted by participants were identified by the researchers, i.e., these messages were believed to contain hate-related messages against an ethnic group or its members.

Third, two volunteer social psychologists were made to examine those 120 messages for potential ethnic hate content. To this end, discussion was, first, made with the raters regarding what constitutes ethnic hate speech in the context of the contemporary political situation in Ethiopia. Then, using inclusion criteria, agreement was secured with them regarding how to identify ethnic hate messages. Following this, they were asked to examine and rate each message independently in a ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ format. Subsequently, inter-rater agreement was established by looking at the raters’ evaluations. The messages which were agreed upon by both raters as having ethnic hate content were at the end taken for final analysis (i.e., eighty messages and fifteen pictures).

In addition, comments given by followers of the four participants to any of the ethnic hate speech were examined in order to understand how followers were

reacting to ethnic hate speech in *Facebook*.

Data Analysis Techniques: In this study, both discourse analysis and content analysis techniques were used in analyzing the data set. Taking a sentence structure into consideration, subject, adjectives, adverbs, and objects of a sentence were well examined for their potential elements of ethnic hate speech. If the post is a picture, its overall intention and meaning embedded in it were examined. The message was also evaluated along the influential power of the participant and number of his/her followers. Needless to say, the relevance of the message selected for analysis was also evaluated from the perspective of the socio-historical context and/or the current political context of the country. Accordingly, each sentence was looked at separately using the socio-historical, cultural, and contemporary political perspective to generate its meaning. Subsequently, meanings of different hate contents were chunked together and themes threaded across certain meanings were identified. Then, by combining similar themes, categories believed to effectively portrait the nature of hate speech were identified. These categories were then given names relevant to characteristics embedded in each. In addition, strategies supposed to be used by participants and, hence, the overall impression the message tries to form in the mind of followers were inferred from the way the messages were framed. The same pattern was followed in identifying and describing the reaction of *Facebook*

followers towards ethnic hate speeches they encountered.

Human Subject Protection: In this study, the names of participants were not mentioned so they are not personally identified. Further, in order to prevent unintended negative outcomes, great care was taken to disguise the names of ethnic groups on both sides, particularly those deemed perpetrators.

Findings

Based on the discourse analysis and content analysis utilized, the following six categories were identified to encapsulate the ethnic hate speeches examined in this study.

Degrading and Dehumanizing: This category of hate speech includes considering out-groups as subhuman. While regarding and promoting one's own group as a super race, the traducing nature of messages against out-groups is evident from the data examined. The demeaning nature of contents was clear. Messages degrade and dehumanize. The statement, 'ዝንቦች ያለ ቦታችሁ አትግቡ እባካችሁ...' that is roughly translated as 'You houseflies! Keep your hands off!' is an example of this category. Here, the use of 'flies' to describe an ethnic group is the very nature of hate speech which paves ways to genocide such as the Rwandan one in which the word cockroaches was used. Legitimizing an impending ethnic violence through an

ignominious use of *words* is the very first step in that direction.

Demonizing: Here demonizing the out-group takes precedence over anything else. Under this category, an attempt is made to give demon-like characteristics to the target out-group. The *Facebook* user posts or shares a deliberately created message which attributes an apparently evil character to the targeted out-group. Particularly, the pictures examined largely possess false information against an ethnic group by giving the group a demonic character such as a mass murderer of innocents, a participant in an incessant massacre, and a vicious exploiter of victim groups. A picture, for example, was found to depict a Bale Oromo (ethnic Oromos around Bale zone of Oromiya Regional State) holding a sharp object (*mencha* or *gejera* in local language) roaming the street in a crowd to cause harm to another ethnic group member. Later on, it was discovered by others who reacted to the post that this picture was taken from other media sources outside of Ethiopia. Another message examined portrayed the late Ethiopian Emperor Minilik II being carried on a cart by his slaves who were portrayed as belonging to another ethnic group who happen to hail from the ethnic group the person sharing this picture descends from. The real picture was, as later found out, a photo shopped one from another source which pictured European colonizers as having been carried by the people whom they enslaved during the scramble for Africa! Depicting a perceived enemy in a demonic stature is again a first ideological step to justify impending violence against it (Stein, 2016).



Figure 1 Photoshop picture falsely representing Minilik II of Ethiopia



Figure 2 Fake news, photos taken outside Ethiopia

Blacklisting: Messages that fall in this category try to list criminal acts and injustices done against the in-group in an effort to galvanize them for action against the out-group. This category entails the defamation, accusation, and depiction of a moral weakness of an out-group, the intent of which is to send a clear warning for what is simmering with resentment in the mindset of the victimized. This category is illuminated by the following post: ‘በጽናቷ ብታከብሯት ኖሮ ለልጅ ልጅ የሚተላለፍባችሁን በደል አትፈጽሙባትም ነበር። የእኔ ግፍ በሙሉ (name of the out-group) አባላት ዘር ማንዘሮች ይደርሳል’ which may roughly be translated as ‘If you had given her due respect, you wouldn’t have committed such a crime against her; and your successive generations will suffer the consequence.’

Ally Formation and Separating: A number of messages were directed against an out-group by closing ranks among members of an in-group. In-group members are coalesced to rally around the cause of putting up a fight against the targeted out-group. Messages call for strengthening uniformity in thought and

unity in action. The formation of potential allies around the in-group is, of course, a potent way of luring people into a perceived cause, a salient example of which may be captivated by the following ‘ከመተማ የተበረሩ የቅማንት እና የትግራይ ተወላጆች በሱዳን ጎረቤት አርዳታ ተደርጎላቸዋል’ which implies that the Sudanese welcomed the people of Tigray and Wolkaet who were forced to leave their domiciles from Metema. This is an example of how a third party is recruited to become an unwavering and trustworthy ally; while at the same time exposing the failure and weakness of the targeted out-group in order to isolate them from others¹. This category lacks any systematic and critical evaluation - it just makes a sweeping conclusion.

Annoying the Target and Showing Indifference: This is a category that captures the essence of posted messages as tools to irritate and incite target out-groups as evil and/or remain indifferent to obvious messages of hate carried against the target victim. This may involve ridiculing, teasing, or laughing at, or showing indifference to the targeted

out-group despite the obvious emotional hurt inflicted on that target. As an example of this category, the following excerpt is quoted from a participant: ‘አገልግል እያሰራችሁ ነው? ሰሞኑን መቼስ ከባድ ጥፊ ነው ያረፈባችሁ። እስኪ ባለፉት 4 ወራት ቀስ በቀስ ጥርሳቼ ወላልቆ...አሁን በድድ መንተባተብ እና መንፈራገጥ ለመላላጥ...’ Which could be roughly translated as ‘Are you recovering from the pain you have encountered recently? In the last four months, the curse up on you has gradually eaten into you. Time is up against you.’ This message is aimed at teasing members of an ethnic group when individuals from this group are reprimanded by the government (possibly for their wrong doings), and some of the actions taken by the government as *reform package* were supposed to intentionally hurt that ethnic group.

Direct Call for Actions: This category includes messages which are calls to organize in-groups for an imminent war, or a direct call for arms, or a call for immediate action of some kind by in-group members against the out-group. The following comment, for example, captures this intent: ‘ይህ ጊዜ አስፈላጊ በሆነ መልኩ በግሩፕ ተደራጅተን ወደ ተግባር የምንገባበት ጊዜ ላይ ነው ያለ ነው። እዚህ መደናበር ትርጉም የለውም፤ ሌላ የሚመራህ አትጠብቅ። አሁን ጦርነት ላይ ነው ያለ ነው (የብሄሩ ስም) ሀገርህ ደሞ ልጄ የታለ አያለች ነው። ለ (የብሄሩ ስም) ሀገርህ ዝምታ ከመረጥክ አንተ የውሻ ልጅ ነህ። ይህ የመጨረሻው ምዕራፍ ነው።’, which could roughly be translated as ‘It is high time that we organized

ourselves and got into action. Do not wait for a leader who tells you what to do. We are at war now (name of an ethnic group). Your land badly needs you now. If you choose to stand silent, then you are a son of a bitch. This is the final chapter!’ A close examination of the hate messages also revealed some of the pertinent strategies embedded in each theme in disseminating the speech and win over followers.

The first key strategy found is focusing more on *social categorization*. It seems, from the data examined that, hate speech is impossible in the absence of social categorization. What is prevalent and is emphasized in the hate speech message is the pronoun ‘*they*’ or directly calling the name of the out-group and hence separating the in-group, ‘*we*’. A clear dichotomy is formed between and among groups. Even though social categorization is antecedent to the articulated message, the writer of the hate content capitalizes on the boundary further so that followers become more emotional as well as biased. The Chinese wall built around ethnic boundaries is a superficial construction that does not withstand scrutiny and the test of history and *ethno genesis*. This is simply the *othering* of the out-group to solidify the internal cohesion of the in-group. The Amharic proverbial adage, ሊበሏት ያሰቧትን አሞራ ጂግራናት ይሏታል, captures the essence of the epigenesis of this strategy.

The second strategy, which is apparent in some of the hate speech messages, is the *creation of emotional appeal* via the inducement of fear. The following excerpt may illustrate this strategy of fear-arousal: ‘It *appears the second round of Qimant [name of an ethnic/cultural group] massacre is looming.*’ Concerted efforts among in-group members are made through an articulation of such an apocalyptic imagery. The purpose of doing so is, of course, to prepare perceived victim groups for the ultimate show-down against the perceived victimizer. The in-group underlines the need to be on stand-by by sending a ‘you are not alone’ message. An attempt to create and induce emotions through a sense of high-powered ethno-nationalist appeals and intolerance to the other is clearly evident in most of the messages analyzed.

The third strategy used can be understood as *hasty-generalization*. In this regard, when a single person from an ethnic group utters a word or acts in ways that may be construed as wrongful, that utterance or action will then be generalized to the entire ethnic group the person is perceived to be a member of. A picture was found which portrays people from an ethnic group as killers and enemies to another ethnic group. Captions to the picture condemn the assignment of individuals from the alleged criminal group to a higher ministerial post as illegitimate and unfair to the in-group. This of course is in line with the popular social psychological concept of *stereotyping*, which is ‘a

belief about the personal attributes of a group of people, which are sometimes overgeneralized, inaccurate, and resistant to new information’ (Myers, 2010, p. 309).

The fourth strategy identified is pretending to be an activist who is trying to protect victim groups. In this strategy, the speaker seems fiercely fighting those who are violating human rights and the rule of law. Here, through criticizing, insulting, exposing the wrong doings of the target out-group, hate speech is used as a justification and a way for promoting justice. Here, some writers also over-emphasize the positive qualities of the in-group (or the group whom they seem to defend or fight for) in the name of defending the human right of the in-group by way of deprecating out-group members.

Another key lesson found is regarding how the *Facebook* followers react to the ethnic hate message. In this study, *Facebook* users react to ethnic hate messages in myriad ways. To a single message, tens of thousands are found to react. The content of the reaction varies along the interest, ethnic affiliation, apparent political orientation and persuasion, and the intention of the message. Some followers, for example, support the intention of the writer in different ways from just liking the post to writing flattering and encouraging comments. The source at times provides additional ‘thank you’ content to his/her in-group. This, of course, emboldens the originator of the message. If the comment

made in reaction to the source is negative, the source usually reacts back negatively, and even taking a more blatant and extreme position of negative attitude than before. As a result, the comment given to an original hate messages begets more and more feedback messages and at the end 'pile of comments' are formed, and, hence, a pool of polarized emotions are created. In most cases the *Facebook* users who follow the participants seem to further strengthen the intention of the sources by providing more fake news, defamation, insult and threat against the other group. This appears to strengthen the 'we-they' dichotomization. It was also noted that for some of the fake news which possess ethnic hate content, there were a number of followers who shared the message, apparently accepting it as truth and inundating others to get alongside 'this message'. Through such social influence processes, social groups are demarcated maintaining internal cohesiveness and ultimately leading to what social psychologists refer to as *groupthink*, a very compelling grouping mechanism among members (Brandstatter *et al.*, 1984).

In addition, it was found that older messages of hate content re-emerge and get circulated as new message with no regard to its timeliness. A year-old message may be shared as if it captures current developments. Surprisingly, followers do not examine the timing of this kind of older messages resurfacing in the platform's active pages. Dealing with information without subjecting it to the

accuracy of its timeliness and relevance to realities can only lead to actions that are uncalled for and disastrous. After a thorough examination of the comments *Facebook* followers put to the ethnic hate message, the following characteristics of their messages were extrapolated:

Emotional Response: Many followers appear to be sensitive and highly emotional in their responses to messages. Their sensitivity and emotionality are encapsulated in their vociferous statements that lack empirical data to support their pronouncements. Instances of emotional outbursts and symptoms of the absence of rationality, calmness, and civility are observed in many of the messages posted, commented upon, or shared. Some of the comments observed, for example, are void of data or facts, or lack relevance to the message altogether. As a result, no meaningful data or facts are exchanged between and among followers. Instead of information exchange, emotions such as insults and bullying are exchanged. As such, in many of the messages examined, using emotion-laden words and symbols are common. A subterranean network of intended criminal acts lurks beneath the expressed emotions. Some of them even seem to have irresistible lust to instantaneously respond to message with high-powered emotional outbursts. What a loss of the *rational human creature that is reflective, logical, and creative!*

Egocentrism: In many of the comments examined, posters seem to be either unable or unwilling to even consider the

view-points of others. Messages that are contrary to the perspective of the readers are simply overlooked. This is how facts are relegated to the backburner and personal views get recycled with no regard to their authenticity. *Facebook* followers are found to be even unable to finish reading the message to which they are responding. In many parts, it was found that followers know and care only for what they are writing without considering the other party's perspectives.

Intolerance to Opposing Views: Many *Facebook* users examined in this study were found to show little tolerance to messages which they found is against their wish. They usually engage in insulting each other in a way that keeps the writers in a tug-of-war wherein both sides find themselves in a series of insults which exacerbate the problem further, and show a sign of disrespect to all involved. This trend also lets many others join the battle to let the belligerent continue to fight it out endlessly. Mostly, they also spontaneously respond to messages in very strong tones demonstrating little tolerance and civility. This tendency of intolerance is also found to be associated with the tendency of inflexibility and rigidity in thought.

Selective Attention and Information Processing: here, the individual selectively chooses and comments on ideas which are consonant with one's preconceived notion or attitude. A related feature of the conversation examined is *group serving bias* which is the tendency

to explain away out-group members' positive behaviors; also attributing negative behaviors to their dispositions (Myers, 2010). The data indicated that individuals attribute desirable behavior and action to their in-groups, while throwing blames on to the out-groups, even by fabricating lies. For example, it is observed that the so-called two-digit economic growth of Ethiopia is attributed to the hard work of in-group and its members; while the internal ethnic conflict and displacement, poverty, beggary and the like are attributed to the inherent incompetency of the out-group. Even in the very presence of relevant and credible data that is contrary to personal views of the *Facebook* user, views are either deliberately omitted or simply relegated to the back burner. This, according to Shiraev and Levy (2013), captures the essence of either *assimilation bias* and/or the *belief perseverance met at thought* or thought principle.

Inconsiderateness and Irresponsibility: Some *Facebook* followers are found to be totally inconsiderate to what may happen in society as a result of their posts or comments. They take no responsibility and tend to be unethical in their way of using the platform. They engage in very blatant derogatory and pejorative comments against an ethnic group possibly as a mechanism of incitement. Eccentrically, the intention of some of the messages examined seems to be geared toward the creation of mindsets that question the integrity and social fabric of the Ethiopian society. To

illustrate this, a message found in the *Facebook* reads, 'ትግራይ ሪፐብሊክ ከላይ በኤርትራ ከታች በአማራ ከጎን በአፋር ተከባ እብረቷ ሊተነፍስላት ጥቂት ቀናት ቀርቷታል!!!', which is roughly translated as “Tigray Republic has been encircled by Eritrea in the north, Amhara in the South, and Afar in the East. Its arrogance will go bust in a few days.” This message apparently was meant to create an impression that the rest of the people of Ethiopia and Eritreans are enemy to Tigray.

Generalization: One of the ways in which *Facebook* followers are reacting to posted messages is by mixing individual views with the so-called ‘ethnic views’; a failure to differentiate politicians from the ethnic group they purport to represent. As such the bad deeds of a political figure are attributed to his/her entire ethnic group. This further creates disagreement with those who are members of the groups referenced in the posted comment. This perhaps fits with what Shiraev and Levy refer to as the *representative bias* (2013). As an instance of this sort, a reported misdeed of an Ethiopian military general who was leading the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, GERD for short, is attributed to the entire ethnic group he came from. As such accusations, contempt, and insults pass from individuals to groups they are purported to ‘represent’.

Discussion

In the current political situation where identity-based politics is pursued, an act

by one person is considered as if it represents an entire community. This is a faulty trend and thread that is tearing the fabric of the Ethiopian polity. There is no logical justification to pass on an individual’s in to the entire members of an ethnic group. It is such unrepresentative generalizations that are creating havoc and polarization among our society. The exchanges are full of sentiment and emotions, wasted in licking our old wounds, largely those which are based on past narrations. In line with this, Gordon Allport, in his book on ‘the Nature of Prejudice’ once said “If we foresee evil in our fellow man, we tend to provoke it; if good, we elicit it.” (1958, in Myers, p. 345). Therefore, the demonizing and blacklisting nature of the hate speech observed in this study are but warning signs to be taken seriously and that all concerned parties get fully engaged in coming up with formidable ways of protecting citizens from the consequences of hate speech.

When we reflect on the magnitude of the hate speech observed in this study, we, at the same time, ponder the issue of how it might get to an even higher and alarming level. According to Benesch’s (2012) proposed framework, for example, the hate speech examined in this study can be considered dangerous speech. Benesch’s framework for dangerous hate speech includes popularity of the speaker; the emotional state of the audience; the presence of a call to action; and the historical and social context in which the hate speech occurs. Alas, if we are right

in our formulation which we think we are, the predicament of the Ethiopian society, at least, in the short-run is worrisome, to put it mildly.

In addition, the political situation in Ethiopia at the time of data collection and write-up was manifestly filled with inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts, which according to some, create a fertile ground for the production and circulation of hate speech (Gagliardone, *et al.*, 2014; Mondal, *et.al.* 2017). The inter-ethnic violence observed in contemporary Ethiopia has been simmering over decades and it is now taking place in flagrant violation of the law.

The finding also shows that if such huge content of hate speech is found from few individuals, we can imagine what it would be like if more extensive explorations were to be made. In this regard, some scholars also noted that the greater the incidence of hate speech in a given social environment, the greater willingness to use it on the part of those who receive it frequently (Winiewski, *et al.*, 2017). This is, of course, consonant with the known social psychological principle of *Mere Exposure Effect* in attitude formation, i.e., the more frequently people have been exposed to a stimulus, the more they like the stimulus, without any need to pair the stimuli with other positive stimuli as in evaluative conditioning (Zajonc, 1968, in Baumeister, and Finkel, 2010). Likewise, if *Facebook* followers frequently encounter hate speech in their *Facebook*

sites, chances are that they are more likely to be influenced by it.

Research shows that the presence of hate speech has a contagious effect and that it unites and divides at the same time (Wibke, 2008). Waldron (2012) also noted that one of the functions of hate speech is to let others with similar views know they are not alone, and hence has an intention of reinforcing a sense of a stronger 'we'. In this study, the grudges and warnings observed reveal a secondary prejudice, which is about perception of a particular group as deserving bad treatment because of their perceived historical misdeeds.

Many of the *Facebook* followers examined here were found to be using highly polarizing statements that are powerful enough to be a source of worry for many families and communities who are concerned about the fate of their country. For example, participants are found to have been engaged in blatantly attacking the freedom of others in a way of warning and insulting other individuals or their ethnic group. We understand that this approach is unhelpful and even dangerous to the process of establishing and maintaining a safe, caring and humane environment for the common good. Indeed, direct attack on or an invasion of people's choice or freedom could backfire and beget more polarized feelings and unintended outcomes in the form of psychological reactance and inoculation (Cialdini, 2007). Psychological reactance maintains that whenever free choice is limited or

threatened, the need to retain our freedoms [e.g., the freedom to choose one's political ideology and/or the in-group being attacked] makes us desire them significantly more than previously (Brehm, 1966, in Cialdini, 2007). Reactance could enhance inoculation, which occurs when a mild and direct attack on the attitude of the target, confers a stronger stand and commitment on the already held position (Baumeister and Vohs, 2007). *Facebook* followers are also found to react to hate message in a way to feel 'supportive' to their in-group in the form of *conformity and compliance*, which in this context are unproductive. *Conformity* is 'a change in behavior or belief as the result of real or imagined group pressure', while *compliance* is 'publicly acting in accord with an implied or explicit request while privately disagreeing' (Meyers, 2010, p. 192).

Summary and Implication of the Study

A cursory look at debate-like conversations between any two or more Ethiopians would lead one to observe the cantankerous nature of the exchanges. It is evident in the study that a mature, civil, and meaningful dialogue and debate is severely lacking from *Facebook* users. Neither does a sense of responsibility and accountability for the expression of the ideas being exchanged and their potential implications duly considered. We should ponder what might account for such behaviors, both cultural and institutional.

We now live in an era where there abounds easy and unlimited access to information through various media outlets chief among which is social media platform like *Facebook*. A careful, constructive, and responsible use of such a platform can protect society from descending into internecine warfare and breakup. Regrettably, the recent proliferation of social media use in the Ethiopian socio-political landscape has become even more potent than artillery in inter-ethnic relations. Societal cohesiveness is being questioned and challenged in part due to the misuse of social media. The highly polarizing, intolerant, and extremist views are taking a tsunami-like character just about to capsize the Ethiopian *body politic*. To counteract or neutralize the insidious impact of hate speech spewed in social media, we offer a few alternative approaches to dealing with it.

Up until very recently, leaders of the Ethiopian Government were quick in shutting down access to social media pretty much like the Imperial Government, which they abhor, used to do about left-leaning books! Alas, neither worked successfully. The options recommended below are not cookie-cutter approaches to solving the problem. Neither are these approaches quick fixes to the complex problems. Instead, we offer sustainable and *individual-empowering* tools to overcome the unwanted consequences of hate speech both in and off social media. They target at bringing about institutional shifts both in ideology and in actions at the same

time. The suggested approaches below emphasize the gradual development of *cultural tools* expressed in institutional settings such as schools. These tools are embedded in the social, cultural, and contextual settings in which they occur.

While formulating our recommendations, it was brought to our attention via media that the Ethiopian government is currently busy with formulating a legal framework against hate speech. Although we are not in a position to know what is being included in that document, we still fear restrictive rules alone, if any, would not solve the problem effectively. This is so because, we understand that hate speech is but a symptom, i. e., the external manifestation of something much more profound, which is intolerance, bigotry, and lack of life skills in general. Therefore, without dealing with the mindset of our society first, legal responses, such as restrictions on freedom of expression alone, are far from sufficient. To tackle the root causes of intolerance, therefore, a much broader set of policy options and measures covering areas of inter-cultural dialogue or education for tolerance and diversity should be given precedence over anything else.

One very efficient and sustainable tool to be sought resides within the micro-system, i.e., the school curriculum and the pedagogy it promotes. The school should equip students with the necessary tool-kit that will enable them to decipher right from wrong, correct from incorrect, truth from falsehood. That tool-kit is a

cognitive tool that is empowering to individual learners and is generally referred to as *critical thinking*. Critical thinking skills will enable learners to evaluate information based on authenticity, credibility, or validity. Students should be educated to develop a healthy dose of skepticism and doubt about information they encounter in any media outlet and then evaluate such information based on empirical and logical evidence to consider it as authentic or credible. This requires a very radical alteration of how young people from grade school to graduate school need to be educated. Embedding critical thinking tools across the curriculum at all levels of schooling and not just college level only is a step in the right direction.

The school curricula at different levels of schooling and teacher preparation programs need to be overhauled through a deliberate training of young people in critical thinking skills. It is one thing to teach science as mere content areas, but quite different to teach young people how to think scientifically when evaluating information. Learning *how to think* is as important, if not more important, than *what to think*. The virtues of *metacognition* cannot and should not be downplayed if the Ethiopian schools are committed to *educating* the next generation of Ethiopian thinkers in diversified fields of study. We can only hope that the much talked-about and celebrated education reform, awkwardly translated and in our judgment perhaps incorrectly as “ፍፍተ ካርታ,” will situate

critical thinking at the epicenter of the education reform around which curriculum and pedagogy are synchronized (Beyer, 1985; Bonney & Sternberg, 2011; Halpern, 2008; Moon, 2008). It is the *schooled* that uses the social media and that is why our recommendation revolves around this social group.

A corollary alternative approach we put forth relates to a radical alteration of the *macro-system* that puts undue emphasis on *ethno-nationalist* differences. The *politics of difference*, hitherto officially sanctioned, should be tamed by changing ideological pronouncements and its institutional expressions including the outmoded and non-academic concepts of *nations, nationalities, and peoples*, remnant ideological concepts from the *Soviet era!* This may call for a second look at larger institutions like culture, ideology, constitution, etc. and make the necessary effort to identify parts that need to be changed overtime in order to bring about sustainable changes in the ways these broad societal-level institutions bar people from indulging in developing critical thinking skills. Mechanisms at the micro- and macro-levels need to be developed and instituted sooner than later in order to sustainably safeguard young people from falling into the trap of ethnic hate speech and its attendant political ramifications. In other words, changes in the micro-systems and macro-systems need to be well synchronized (Bronfenbreunner, 2005). Attain the creation of young mind-sets that are reflective, logical, and evidence-

based when evaluating information and the impact of hate speech will be minimal.

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