



Foreign Policy and Communication Barriers: Rethinking Language and Media Strategies in Ethiopian Public Diplomacy

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Abstract

International language and media are crucial tools for public diplomacy to engage and influence the attitudes of foreign audiences strategically. Despite a recent resurgence of interest in foreign policy issues, the existing literature has a critical gap in assessing how language and media barriers are affecting public diplomacy. The study employed a qualitative approach grounded in 'soft power' and constructivist public diplomacy theories, utilizing case study and explanatory research designs. Secondary data underwent historical contextualization and content and discourse analysis. The findings show that diplomatic communications were multilingual during the imperial period and shifted to unilingual since the fall of the monarchy, reflecting the realities in national mass media. The study also uncovered that the dominance of local languages and the absence of international media have prevented public diplomacy messages from reaching global audiences. Moreover, the study found additional limitations, including a lack of a unified national narrative and a highly fragmented domestic media landscape, which mirrors the complex political context, and reliance on the absence of a long-term proactive strategy that ensures sustainable understanding and practice. The study concludes that within the current media and language setup, Ethiopia's soft power and ability to shape its narrative through strategic communication on the global stage are critically limited. Finally, the study recommended addressing domestic political challenges and enhancing a united national narrative, shifting from reactive to proactive public diplomacy strategy, directing national media towards engaging foreign audiences both in language skills and media outreach, and enhancing the communication capacity of the existing diplomatic infrastructure

Keywords: Ethiopia, foreign policy, public diplomacy, language, media

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the term “public diplomacy” goes back to the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. During this period, both in Europe and the United States of America (USA), the term was used to describe war-related public communications and to promote diplomatic initiatives to end the war (Black, 2010). However, before public diplomacy was widely integrated into mainstream diplomacy, the rise of the Italian Fascist and German Nazi regimes in the 1930s hindered its growth, and the word only rarely appeared in the media during the interwar period. In the post-Second World War (WWII) era, the term resurfaced due to the revival of the Wilsonian principles after the establishment of the United Nations (UN). In the 1950s, it started to appear widely in the media to describe different concepts, including propaganda, war of information, and psychological warfare. Moreover, the terms “open diplomacy” and “media diplomacy” were used interchangeably, especially focusing on the communication aspects of foreign policy (Cull, 2008).

During the Cold War, public diplomacy was designed and applied based on the rationale that the creation of a favorable attitude among the public in antagonistic states would positively influence the foreign policy of the governments that led such states. However, the division of the world into two blocks and ideologically founded extreme propaganda by both sides negatively affected the role of public diplomacy in foreign policy. Rather than communications, showing of force defined foreign policy of states in this epoch of world history (Gilboa, 2008). After the end of the Cold War, the expansion of information and communication technologies, an increasing number of non-state actors, and free movements of goods and people in the absence of ideological division opened a new era of public diplomacy. The end of the Cold War also revealed the deficiency of power politics in promoting national interest and underlined the relevance of public diplomacy as one of the major tools of foreign policy, particularly to influence the international audience favorably (Richmond, 2022).

In the context of the post-Cold War global order, the term “soft power” was coined with public diplomacy by Joseph Nye to point to the need to promote national interest with

communication of ideas, cultures, and policies (Nye, 1990, 2005). This notion of public diplomacy has brought a long-lasting impact on the concept of public diplomacy, resulting its 21st century understanding that focuses on the increasing interconnectedness and interdependence made possible by globalization, and the change in communication that brought a shift in how actors exchange and seek information, the proliferation of non-state actors, and the effect of the media (Melissen, 2005). The major event after the end of the Cold War that affected the evolution of public diplomacy was the 9/11 attacks, which underlined the need for public diplomacy, proving the necessity of employing soft power in the foreign policy of the USA and the West towards the Middle East (Dutta-Bergman, 2006). This understanding of public diplomacy underscored the role of language and media in public diplomacy communications that aim to influence and convince foreign audiences.

Media is one of the major instruments of public diplomacy, and most developed states employ international news media broadcasts in English as a tool to influence and promote favorable attitudes at the global level (Pope, 2014; Simons, 2018). This has also reflected global power relations as international media is dominated by the West and developing regions like Africa lag far behind other regions in terms of using international media networks to promote their national interests (Khattak et al., 2012). However, in the last two decades, non-Western international media have been taking root, intending to counter the Western monopoly in international communication and agenda setting. Russia's RT News, China's CGTN, Qatar's Al Jazeera, Turkey's Anadolu Agency, and Iran's Press TV are among non-Western television channels that propagate alternative discourses and narratives in English. With the increasing influence of non-Western states as global and regional actors, the challenge to the non-Western narrative on global politics is growing (Jin, 2021).

The relation between public diplomacy and media was reconsidered following the innovation and widespread application of information and communication technologies, especially the use of digital platforms for public diplomacy communications. Digital diplomacy empowered not only states that lack infrastructure to own international media but also transformed individuals from passive information consumers to producers and

newscasters (Bjola, 2019; Sailu, 2022). For both mainstream and digital diplomacy, language plays a critical role, given that public diplomacy targets foreign audiences. The trend of language use in mainstream media, education, and official language in most African countries was determined by their colonial legacy (Severo & Makoni, 2020). Because of its unique history, the question of foreign language in public life is more sensitive in Ethiopia's case than in other African states (Sharma, 2013, 75). As a non-colonized state, a foreign language did not achieve a dominant status over the local Ethiopian language. Thus, unlike most African countries, the mainstream media in Ethiopia is dominantly in Amharic and other local languages (Aseres, 2015).

Despite the growing interest in public diplomacy in Ethiopia recently, there is a critical gap in examining what language and media use landscape has been unfolding and how it affects the use of strategic and global communications to support foreign policy. The available literature on public diplomacy and diplomacy of Ethiopia concentrates on the effects of digital communication on the practice (Ayenew, 2024; Bilate, 2022; Huluka, 2023; Manor & Adiku, 2021; Zerai, 2024) and the role of public diplomacy in mitigating foreign policy crises (Abbink, 2021; Canie, 2021; Waktola, 2023). Questions associated with language use in Ethiopia are also studied from different perspectives, including from the question of inclusiveness (Hussein, 2008; Yigezu, 2010), education policy (Alemu & Tekleselassie, 2006; Chali et al., 2021; McNab, 1990), media (Workneh, 2024), and overall language policy (Anteneh & Ado, 2006; Smith, 2008; Zahorik & Teshome, 2009).

Employing a qualitative approach grounded in 'soft power' and constructivist public diplomacy theories with case study and explanatory research designs, this study investigated how language and media use public diplomacy are impacting foreign policy dynamics, focusing on uncovering historical change and continuity and how the historical legacies, media infrastructure, and language are impacting current practices.

2. OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

This study's main goal is to uncover how barriers in language and media use affect the possibility of public diplomatic strategic communications as a foreign policy tool. Moreover, the study investigates the historical trajectory of language use practices in the

diplomatic interaction of Ethiopian governments since the second half of the 19th century to uncover its legacies. The study also examines how barriers in language and media affected the prospect of realizing Ethiopia's foreign policy objectives, with a particular attention on recent public diplomacy engagements pursued to counter Western media narratives about domestic instability and regional developments. In line with these goals, the questions the study intended to answer regarding language use in Ethiopia's public diplomacy are:

- What changes and continuities in language use have occurred in modern Ethiopian diplomacy?
- How have the language practices of mainstream mass media affected strategic public diplomacy communication?
- What is the effect of language and media shortcomings in instrumentalizing public diplomacy amid recent foreign policy challenges?

3. THEORETICAL APPROACH OF THE STUDY

This study employed a “soft power” and constructivist theories of public diplomacy to understand the historical and contemporary role of language and media in Ethiopian public diplomacy. To understand the role of language use in media and public diplomacy, this study employed the notion of “soft power” as articulated by Joseph Nye and the constructivist notion of public diplomacy that recognizes the place of values, ideas, and identity in the diplomacy and foreign policy of states. In the post-Cold War foreign policy contexts of the USA, Nye developed the concept of soft power that is founded on the need to address the limitations of military build-up and propaganda in achieving foreign policy objectives and the need to employ ideas, values, cultures and persuasive policies to influence the international community and promote national interest (Nye, 1990, 2005, 2019).

Since the first decade of this century, soft power as a tool of achieving foreign policy objectives has expanded to the non-Western world as states resort to using interactions in education, language, sports, cultures, ideas, values, media, and art as instruments of

influencing foreign audiences and promoting national interests. The increasing number of actors in international relations and advancements in information, communication, and transportation technologies have aided this dimension of diplomacy (Trunkos, 2013). The centrality of language, identity, values, and ideas in public diplomacy and the concept of soft power “aligns social constructivism’s emphasis on legitimacy as a source of power and associated notions of ideational power that come from the spreading of knowledge and ideas” (Byrne, 2008: 176). Constructivist notions help to deeply recognize the impact of communication and information technologies in global politics and relations between states (Pisarska, 2016).

Among other things, Ethiopia’s foreign policy since the dawn of the beginning of 20th century has been a reflection of its unique success in averting colonialism. The defiance against colonialism has contributed to Ethiopia’s image as a symbol of black freedom and a champion of the struggle against colonialism that shaped the country’s continental and global perceptions (Anoba, 2022). The success of Emperor Haile Selassie I in bringing the factions of post-colonial African elites together to set up the Organization of African Union (OAU) in 1963 consolidated Ethiopia’s critical role in Africa’s diplomacy, thereby setting a solid ground for Ethiopia’s soft power at continental and global levels (Abrahamsen, 2020). Ethiopia’s continental and global image is also shaped by its unique place in the Pan-African movement and black solidarity against colonialism and oppression that shaped how Ethiopia is perceived to the current time (Gebrekidan, 2012).

A display of soft power, based as the only black independent state, has been a defining feature of Ethiopia’s foreign policy that is also expressed in its commitment to multilateralism at the regional and global level. This was a foreign policy legacy of the imperial Ethiopia that the consecutive regimes capitalized on and used to assert Ethiopia’s place in African politics and in the global states like the UN (Yihun, 2012). Thus, given the ideational forces behind Ethiopia’s public diplomacy and foreign policy that are aligned with “soft power” and constructivist perspectives, this study underlines the significance of language and media in supporting Ethiopia’s exceptional diplomatic success and examines

how changing domestic and global issues in the absence of effective public diplomacy communication undermine the achievement of foreign policy objectives.

4. RESEARCH METHOD

Since its emergence in the immediate post-WWII period to the end of the century, public diplomacy has been one of the least investigated dimensions of international relations and politics. Even if public diplomacy studies show a significant increase since the beginning of the 21st century, the question of methodology and the place of public diplomacy in the wider international relations and political science theoretical debate is still unanswered (Ayhan & Sevin, 2022). Like any other political communication, public diplomacy is a complex phenomenon involving state and non-state actors with varying power and interests that require the consideration and interpretation of different perspectives (Mokhtar, 2017). Thus, the study of the place of language and media in this complex interaction should incorporate complex domestic political and media context, regional dynamics that affect states and global politics, and media terrain.

Thus, despite the importance of mixed research methods to investigate diplomatic communications, qualitative research methods, including the historical document analysis method, the qualitative interview method, and the qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis methods, allow us to deeply understand the power, interest, and perspective of actors in political communications. The qualitative research method allows exploring the nexus between language use and public diplomacy effectiveness by relying on review of a review of available studies and other secondary sources. This method also allows for considering different perspectives towards complex diplomatic processes flexibly. Moreover, it acknowledges the importance of historical narratives and the role and power of institutions and states in shaping political and diplomatic trends (Obaid & Gul, 2016).

Thus, to achieve the objectives of this study and answer the questions, a qualitative research method with case study and explanatory research designs was used to uncover the trend of media and language use in Ethiopia's public diplomacy and how this dynamic impairs the use of the public as a key foreign policy tool. Despite the recently increasing interest in

foreign policy issues because of domestic and regional development, studies on Ethiopian foreign policy have not examined the media and language landscape in public diplomacy and its ramifications. However, these subjects have been studied as part of Ethiopia's political history of the states and political biography of leaders. Thus, the use of these sources through historical contextualization is employed in this study to uncover the roots and legacies of language and media use in Ethiopian foreign policy and diplomacy.

Regarding the sources, the study relied on the analysis of secondary data, including books, journal articles, and other data from electronic sources. Think tanks reports, media coverage, and content from emerging media are also integrated in the study. In this regard, a review and analysis of multi-disciplinary studies, including history, political science, international relations, journalism, and media and communication studies, makes substantial body of this study. The study acknowledges limitations that arise as a result of omitting primary data as the result to accessibility and other constraints. The collected data from secondary sources were organized thematically for historical contextualization, and discourse and content analysis to achieve the objectives set and answer the questions asked.

5. CHANGE AND CONTINUITY OF LANGUAGE USE IN ETHIOPIA'S DIPLOMATIC HISTORY

The contemporary Ethiopian state has an old origin and has had diplomatic interactions over the course of its history. For instance, historical evidence shows that the Axumite Kingdom (100-940 CE) had commercial and cultural interactions with South Arabia and the great powers of the time beyond the Middle East (Henze, 2000). Strong commercial and cultural exchanges with the Middle East during this period also led to the early entry of Christianity and Islam into Ethiopia. The medieval history of Ethiopia also saw increased interaction with Europe in addition to trade and religious contacts with Egypt and South Arabia (Erlich, 2013). The emergence of modern Ethiopia since the second half of the 19th century was also greatly influenced by interactions with the foreign sphere because, despite its crucial internal part, the process of setting up a central authority was decided by diplomatic and violent encounters with regional (Egypt and Sudan) and global (European) powers. This internal competition between Tewodros II, Yohannes IV (1871-

1889), and Menelik II (1889-1913) was accompanied by vital regional developments, including the arrival of European powers to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. Moreover, the advent of colonialism in the last quarter of the 19th century gave momentum to the domestically initiated process of territorial consolidation (Zewde, 2022).

The quest to preserve the cohesion of the Ethiopian polity by countering centrifugal trends and thwarting external challenges required not only making war and resistance but also engaging in diplomatic interactions. However, diplomatic interactions faced several challenges, including the absence of a centralized path for foreign communications, distance and security obstacles for envoys, and language barriers (Pankhurst, 1973). Language is central for the success of diplomatic communications, and Ethiopian rulers were aware of this as they kept balderbas who were serving as translators, interpreters and even as advisors. Medieval and Modern Ethiopia's diplomatic communication dominantly took place through the local languages of Geez and Arabic (Ram, 1986). Arabic pioneered other foreign languages as a medium of diplomatic communications. Amharic, French and English started to replace Geez and Arabic since the second half of the 19th century. Even though English was dominantly considered as a language of religion, given its use by the missionaries with the expansion of their activities in Ethiopia since the second half of the 19th century, it gradually expanded to the diplomatic scene (Sharma, 2013).

Before the 19th century, both domestic messages between the ruling class and diplomatic written letters were not common, as communication was conducted by mouth. However, there were multiple occasions when Ethiopian rulers sent letters that included Emperor Yeshaq I (1414-1429) who sent a letter to King Afonso of Aragon in 1428, and Emperor Zara Yaeqob (1434-1468) sent to the Ethiopian community in Jerusalem. Emperor Lebne Dengel (1508-1540) and Emperor Galawdewos (1540-1559) also sent letters to Portugal written in Geez as they pleaded support in the fight against Ahmed Ibn Al-Ghazi (Pankhurst, 1973). Though most of the letters were written in Geez, Arabic was the first foreign language to be used in diplomatic communications, especially in communication with Egypt and the Middle East. Arabic was the medium of communication in the close

relation between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Egyptian Coptic Church, as the latter was responsible for sending the pope (Abun) to Ethiopia (Eshete, 1973).

Among the local languages, the shift to Amharic as a diplomatic language began in the second half of the 19th century. Emperor Tewodros II sent over thirty letters to Queen Victoria via the envoy of Queen Hormuzd Rasam. Among the thirty-seven letters, thirty-four were written in Amharic and the rest in Arabic (Pankhurst, 2005a). Diplomatic contacts increased during the reign of Emperor Yohannes IV, and the number of Ethiopians studying abroad also increased. A few of these Ethiopians served as advisors and translators, including Mahidereqal Woldemedhin, Mircha Worqe, and Yohannes Masasa. Moreover, there were several European translators who were engaged in easing diplomatic engagements, among whom the French citizen Jean Baraglion was the most notable one (Pankhurst, 1974: 83; Pankhurst, 2005b). Language skill was a particularly important qualification that Ethiopian rulers considered in selecting their diplomats, regardless of the nationality of the individual. Regarding this, Ram (1986, 133) observed that:

The Ethiopian rulers chose as their ambassadors and envoys those who seemed to them the best qualified for the job. Nationality, race, religion, or social class were not used as criteria for the position. Both Ethiopians and foreigners were sent out as the emperor's envoys. But they had to have the emperor's confidence. Almost all Ethiopians chosen as envoys during this period had good literary and religious education and a knowledge of English or French, or both languages. Some of them also had knowledge of Arabic or Italian.

In the late 19th century and the early 20th century, French replaced Arabic as a major language of foreign communication. English did not become popular in Ethiopia until the beginning of this century. The American mission to Menelik II in 1906 noted that the Ethiopian ruling aristocracy was more familiar with the French than English (Ram, 1986, 135-36). With the advent of modern education in the early 20th century, the role of the English language was enhanced in rivalry with French. Thus, in the first modern school opened by Emperor Menelik II in 1908, the two languages were taught in addition to Italian (Pankhurst, 1974). From this time to the Italian invasion of 1935, English and French were

used in parallel for diplomatic communications, and French and English-speaking Ethiopians were in competition with each other. However, the dominance of the former was clear as Abera (2021) called the period from 1897 (the signing of the first friendship agreement with France) to 1935, the “heyday of French” given it was the major language for diplomatic communications, education, and elite culture.

Beyond the domain of the traditional diplomatic practice, the introduction of public diplomacy is the result of Haile-Selassie I’s domestic consolidation of power and global diplomatic success. His first trip to Europe in 1924 was the first of its kind, which went beyond the traditional diplomatic mission as he attracted the attention of the European public who canonized him as ‘a crown prince of a black and the only non-colonized African state’. In the post-WWII era, his emergence as a regional and global diplomatic figure highly influenced the perception of Ethiopia in Africa, Europe, the USA, and beyond. His visits to Europe not only shaped Ethiopia’s global image they also determined the attitude of the American and European public towards Africa (Vestel, 2011). The emperor established close relationships with leaders of other states, including the presidents of the USA, and he was warmly welcomed during his visits both by the government and the public, enabling him to influence the attitude of the foreign public audience significantly (Kassa, 2024). In his late years, the emperor was immersed in foreign issues and diplomatic missions that went further to the level of making him leave domestic issues to his subordinates (Zewde, 2002).

The second half of the 20th century saw major catastrophes that negatively affected Ethiopia’s image in the global community. One of the worst famines that occurred in the 1970s and the civil war in the late 1970s and 80s portrayed Ethiopia as a country of hunger and war (Clay & Holcomb, 1986). There was an attempt to change this global perception during the Derge government with the global cultural diplomatic initiative. The diplomatic mission called People for People Arts Group (Amharic *hizb-le-hizb kinet budin*) was an important instrument in introducing the cultural diversity of Ethiopia foreign public. Comprising distinguished Ethiopian musicians and artists, the group traveled across the world entertaining the foreign audience with the dances, songs, and dress styles of diverse

Ethiopian ethnic groups. In addition to cultural diplomacy, the sport and tourism industries were important tools for reaching out to the foreign public. However, as discussed in the next section, public diplomacy engagements of Ethiopia across all regimes relied on historically constructed achievements within the contexts of the struggle against colonialism and the use of international media and language to persuade the foreign public is limited.

6. LANGUAGE USE IN ETHIOPIAN MASS MEDIA AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

For centuries, books written in Geez originating from the Orthodox Church were regarded as the main source of knowledge and communication in Ethiopia, although the ownership and use of these books were limited among the clergy and the nobility. Moreover, there was no mass production of books as they were copied by hand, and most of the population was illiterate (Reta, 2013). Sources indicate that the modern printing press entered Ethiopia through Eritrea for the first time in 1863 by Italian priest Lorenzo Biancheri and continued to expand into various parts of the country, including to Keren in 1879, to Meenkulo in 1885, and to Harar in 1901. In addition to Italians, the French and Swedish missionaries also played a key role in introducing the modern printing press to produce religious books (Abebe, 2019; Gupta, 1991). Thus, the emergence of the modern printing press is the amalgamation of the indigenous literary culture of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the introduction of the modern printing press by the missionaries.

The above developments were important for the emergence of newspapers that took place during the reign of Menelik II, replacing the handwritten sheets circulating among the nobility, focusing on the deeds of the Emperor and Empress Taytu. The first printed newspaper was the weekly Aimro (“Intellect”) in 1902, with copies ranging from 20 to 200 in Amharic (Reta, 2013). Although rudimentary, the first government-backed printing press was also set up in 1905, which served as a starting point for the development of printing presses in Ethiopia (Gupta, 1991). In 1914, at the beginning of the First World War (WWI), YeTor Were (War News) was published in Amharic, and Le Courier d’Ethiopie (The Ethiopian Messenger) in French; and in 1917, Goha Tsebah (The Dawn)

was published in Amharic. From 1923–1936, Ethiopia had six publications, including Berhan'ena Selam (Light and Peace), Aithiopicos Kosmos (Ethiopian World) in Greek in 1925; L'Ethiopie Commerciale in French in 1932, Atbia Kokab (The Morning Star) in Amharic in 1934, and from 1934–1936, Ye-Ethiopia Demts (Voice of Ethiopia) in Amharic. Ye-Ethiopia Demts was closed during the Italian occupation (1935-41) and came back to publication in 1958 (Sida, 2023).

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Berhan'ena Selam appeared not only as the major newspaper to communicate government information but also as a platform for a debate among the elites on important topics like the questions of modernization and state building. Ethiopia's unique quest that embarked upon domestically motivated modernization and state building in the face of colonialism was the grand predicament the elite and ruling class met (Giorgis, 2010). Berhane'ena Selam was renamed as Addis Zemen ("New Era") after the liberation of Ethiopia in 1941. Like the former Addis Zemen was published in Amharic and continued as the mouthpiece of the Ethiopian government (Dires, 2012). While the printing press before the Italian invasion was highly confined to domestic consumption around the ruling class, the first major attempt to use international language to communicate the government's perspective to the international audience took place in the early 1940s with the coming of the Ethiopian Herald Newspaper (Abebe, 2020).

Although the Ethiopian News Agency was set up during this time and the institutionalization of communications started to take root, in comparison with Addis Ababa, the diversification of foreign languages in the printing press was better in Eritrea as a result of British and Italian influence. The newspapers published in foreign languages during this time in Eritrea were Eritrean Daily Bulletin (in English), Quatidiano Eritrea (in Italian), the Eritrea Weekly News (in Tigrinya), and The Arabio Weekly News (in Arabic). In the late 1950s, although with a limited language diversification, the printing press expanded with the start of more newspapers called Ye'Ethiopia Dimits that were both in English and Amharic, and L' Ethiopia d'Aujourdhui in French. Generally, state mass media during this time used English and French to some extent, and it focused on communicating

the Ethiopian government's perspectives to the foreign audience. Moreover, it was highly dependent on foreign resources and expertise (Gartley, 1980).

Foreigners have also played a critical role in the introduction of major electronic media, i.e., radio and television. The first radio station was set up in 1935 by the Italian Company, Ansaldo, and the television broadcast was set up in 1963 by the British company, Thomson (Abebe, 2020). But even more than the printing press, electronic media were dominantly in Amharic and were ineffective in influencing the perceptions of the foreign audience residing in the country and abroad. In both printing and electronic dimensions, mass media in Ethiopia were introduced and gradually expanded during the imperial period with strong involvement of foreign resources and knowledge (Gartley, 1980). However, as discussed above, mass media during the imperial regime faced several challenges that brought its limited application for public diplomacy, including dependence on foreign resources and expertise, concentration on local languages, and poor media infrastructure.

During the Derge regime (1974-1991), centralization and unilingual character of mass media continued. Party-owned publications *Meskerem* (September), *Serto Ader* (Worker), and the pre-Derg *Yezareyitu Ethiopia* (Ethiopia Today) were published in addition to the previously mentioned *Addis Zemen* and the *Ethiopian Herald* (Belete & Singh, 2009, 2012). Although the Cold War was marked by an intensified global war of information between the West and the East, Ethiopia's mass media remained localized, consumed by domestic propaganda in the context of the civil war that started immediately after the Derg came to power. Although no remarkable development took place in the utilization of media for public diplomacy, other dimensions of diplomacy were relatively promoted during this period, which included cultural diplomacy, tourism diplomacy, and athletics diplomacy. As it is discussed in the second section of this study, these attempts to influence the foreign public were pursued to curb the negative publicity Ethiopia received as a result of the famine that occurred in the 1970s.

After the fall of the Derge regime in 1991, the first press law was legislated, and the private press flourished, reaching around 400 newspapers and magazines in the late 1990s. In 1995, 1995 ERTA (Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency) was created as a result of the

merger between the Ethiopian Radio and the ETV (Ethiopian Television) (Abebe, 2020). However, despite the progress in local language use in the media, there was no significant development in establishing media that target foreign languages and foreign audiences. Given the ethnic-based politics EPRDF pursued, the integration of local languages into the media was more important than the use of foreign languages that target foreign audiences. Like everywhere else, politics, media, and language in Ethiopia are intertwined, one affecting the other. Skjerdal & Moges (2021) observed that Ethiopia's mainstream media during EPRDF became 'ethnified, polarized and regionalized. The regional television broadcasts that are set up by all regional governments and by some zonal governments in Southern Ethiopia broadcast in local languages, and they have dominated the national media.

Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC); formerly known as ETV, continued as a major mouthpiece of the government under EPRDF, with significant language diversification and adding more new channels. The broadcast constitutes five channels: EBC News, which mainly broadcasts in Amharic; EBC Languages; ETV Entertainment; ETV Sport, ETV Afaan Oromo, and ETV Yelijochalem. Except for EBC Language and EBC News to some extent, all the channels broadcast in Amharic and other local languages. The former have programs in English, Arabic and French in addition to programs in several other languages. In addition to EBC, public government media outlets in Ethiopia include Ethiopian News Agency (ENA), Ethiopian Press Agency (comprising newspapers of Addis Zemen, al-Alem, Bariisaa, and The Ethiopian Herald). Fana Broadcasting Corporate and Walta Media and Communication Corporate, which were recently merged into one media, are among the major government-affiliated media. Like the EBC, these channels mainly broadcast in Amharic and other local languages and dedicate a few programs in foreign languages, including Fana's programs in Arabic and French.

Like the earlier regimes, the printing press was still more accommodating for foreign languages during the EPRDF rule than other formats of mass media. While the Ethiopian Herald (in English), Al-alem (Arabic), Barissa (Oromoffa) are major state-owned newspapers, the Capital, Addis Fortune, the Daily Monitor, and the Ethiopian Reporter are

private newspapers in English. One of the popular press media, the Ethiopian Reporter, has also dual publications: in Amharic and English (Abebe 2020). Electronic media in Ethiopia use 67 local languages and 4 foreign languages to disseminate content. Seventeen (17) broadcasters use two languages. Exceptionally, the South Mass Media Agency (SMMA), also known as Debub TV, uses 48 languages. Next to the SMMA, the Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN) uses 17 languages, including foreign languages. Foreign languages such as English, French, Swahili, and Arabic are used in electronic media, mostly by public outlets (Skjerdal & Moges, 2021).

However, across all regimes, in addition to policy and infrastructural constraints, public and government-affiliated media in Ethiopia struggled to flourish because they could not retain and benefit from human resources. Seeking a better income, working environment, and freedom, qualified journalists with rich experience leave and join private media companies, establish their own media, or migrate outside of the country (Alemayehu, 2024). Under the Prosperity Party (PP), the mainstream government media is working in the context of resurfaced domestic political instability and civil war, focusing on the domestic audience. Although different channels have programs in foreign languages, they are ineffective in influencing the foreign public as they fall short of reaching the foreign audience.

The fallouts in media and language have become clear recently, although they resurfaced as a result of domestic problems. Moreover, media fragmentation has increased, for instance, during the war in Northern Ethiopia, centrally and regionally owned television channels could not address the need to address a foreign audience on foreign policy issues, given that they were fundamentally localized, focused on the internal war of information. In some cases, regional television and radio broadcasts were engaged in two-way campaigns: one aligned with the federal government and the other horizontal, as illustrated mainly between the Amhara and Tigray media during the war (2002-2022) (Skjerdal & Moges, 2021). In post-2022 Ethiopia, both the domestic and regional dynamics have become more complex and fragmented. While the possibility of the Pretoria peace deal is being challenged by the factions created in TPLF and tensions with the central government,

the war in Amhara and Oromia has also continued to affect the country's domestic and foreign policies. The digital diplomacy, which was vibrant during the war in Ethiopia, is now more fragmented and still impacted by the diaspora, activists, and different competing political establishments.

From a regional perspective, Ethiopia's quest for access to the sea, the war in Sudan, and strained relations with Eritrea are increasingly shaping the foreign policy agendas. The discourse of the government within this dynamic focused on sovereignty, national security, access to the sea, and regional integration, while the attempt to avoid the internationalization of discourses in domestic conflicts continues as a strategy to save national image. Generally, how political developments are affecting public diplomacy in Ethiopia shows that there is a challenge of having a united narrative that promotes national interest because of domestic instabilities and fragmentation, worsened by a lack of public diplomacy media with international language and outreach. Thus, while resolving domestic problems remains critical in promoting a united national narrative, reconsideration of how media and language have been employed in public diplomacy is also a critical foreign policy tool that needs attention.

7. RECENT FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES AND DIGITAL DIPLOMACY

Recent foreign policy challenges that followed domestic political changes and sub-regional developments in the Horn of Africa have increased the interest of the Ethiopian government in public diplomacy. The Nile hydro-politics and interferences from the USA and the UN in the negotiations, the rival of Middle East powers in the Red Sea region, and the quest for access to sea, which brought Somalia, Eritrea, and Egypt to create an anti-Ethiopian axis, are among the recent developments that brought foreign pressure. Domestically, the war in northern Ethiopia (2020-22), the wars in Amhara (2013-present) and Oromia (2018-present) and the consequent unfavorable depictions of Ethiopia's image in international media, and the armed and peaceful opposition have challenged the government's narrative mainly through digital media. Both external and domestic developments have made foreign policy issues major public and media agendas and have attracted increasing scholarly engagement, although limitations are evident in language, outreach, and scope.

The role of public diplomacy in mitigating such negative foreign influences and the need to use international communication for this purpose cannot be overstated. Although fundamentally reactive and not well integrated, there is an attempt to exploit public diplomacy and communications to support foreign policy goals and promote national interests. Successive foreign influences began in early 2020 with the biased involvement of the USA in the GERD negotiations. The UNSC's meeting on the issues of GERD on 6 July 2021, upon the request of Egypt (Lashitew, 2020), and more than a dozen discussions on the war in Northern Ethiopia put immense pressure on Ethiopia's government. In September 2020, the USA sanctioned selected individuals from the two sides in the conflict, and Ethiopia was removed from the advantages of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) the next year (VOA, 2021). In addition to the negative global attention attracted to Ethiopia, the war is also considered a sub-regional threat in the Horn of Africa, where subversive activities, including proxies, have a defining feature of the complex relations between the states.

Although the West has eased its pressure against the Ethiopian government that was pursued during the war in Northern Ethiopia, the continuing war in the Amhara and Oromo regions, the port deal with Somaliland, and the call for fully implementing the Pretoria Agreement have led to the continuation of foreign policy troubles. It was after a peace deal was reached in South Africa that the West toned down its pressure on the Ethiopian government. However, the war in Northern Ethiopia impacted not only domestic affairs but also Ethiopia's role in the Horn of Africa (Vargee, 2021). Even long before the war in Northern Ethiopia, the shortcomings associated with limitations in applying international language and media in Ethiopia's public diplomacy are evident in the attempts to address foreign policy challenges that emanate from the GERD and the use of Nile waters in general. The available few studies on the role of public diplomacy in easing the tensions over the use of Nile waters conclude that the lack of international media broadcasts that convey Ethiopia's message through international languages to the Egyptian and international community is one of the major setbacks (Workineh & Chekol, 2018; Worku, 2024).

The Ethiopian government seems cognizant of this limitation, and several initiatives that can compensate the absence of international media have been launched recently. The establishment of Centers for Diplomacy at higher education institutions, revitalization of the Institute for Foreign Affairs (IFA), the establishment of a water diplomacy and communication forum, and the attempts to deliberately integrate water diplomacy issues into digital diplomacy are worth mentioning here. However, most of these initiatives are reactive measures intended to manage a crisis. They also lack adequate infrastructure and human resources, and are less integrated with the mandates of the institutions to which they are attached. In the absence, long planning in public diplomacy, the engagements are largely reactive and fade after the triggering challenge that attracted attention is mitigated. Although it can be considered as part of the war of information, public diplomacy has been pursued with renewed interest during the war in northern Ethiopia to complement government-to-government diplomatic efforts.

This interest of the government towards public diplomacy-oriented communications was fueled by the fact that, in comparison to TPLF's interests during the war, the perspective of the Ethiopian government was not voiced at the global level. Although the Western media did not cover the war with broader contexts of the root causes of the problem, priority was given to propagating the narratives and discourses of actors in the war in a fashion that supports the war of information (Esayas, 2022; Tofa, 2022). The Ethiopian government blamed the Western media, including CNN, BBC, France 24, and Associated Press, for engaging in propaganda and disseminating false information. Moreover, Egyptian media, including Al-Ahram and Daily News Egypt, had extensively covered developments in Ethiopia in a partisan manner (ENA, 2021). On the other hand, Nigussie et al. (2024), by taking the cases of CNN and Al Jazeera, argued that there was not much difference in how the Western and the non-Western media covered the war, as both used a responsibility frame and called for justice against the perpetrators and for the victims, despite slight differences in the sources they used.

Some studies argued that the Western media's coverage of the war lacked in disseminating false information regarding events on the battlefield, using unrelated images and videos.

This unfavorable media coverage of the Ethiopian government's perspective is believed to have negatively influenced policymakers and diplomats, and international perception, as the Ethiopian government was solely made responsible by the Western media (Abbink, 2021:17). Abbink added that:

Numerous items in these media have distorted or misrepresented events in an incomplete and tendentious manner, akin to sensationalist and attention-grabbing not backed up by the facts or by proper investigation. These reports, in addition to the cyber 'warfare', and the repeated lecturing by Western countries of Ethiopia as the 'bad guy' taking on a smaller region (Tigray), reveal a measure of ignorance and misplaced 'victim bias', and evoke a host of questions not only on the interests of the global media but also (again) on the role of social media propaganda and on the workings of the international system and the UN.

TPLF and its supporters effectively used the sympathy of the Western media to persuade their case to the international community. Moreover, TPLF's successful digital media engagements supported by diaspora rallies strongly addressed the foreign audience, exploiting the media communication weaknesses of the government. Social media affiliated with Western media networks, civil societies, and the activities of the diaspora helped TPLF to propagate its case and challenge the foreign relations narratives of the federal government (Abbink, 2021). On the other hand, the non-Western international media were more compassionate to the perspective of the Ethiopian government, as it was clear in the coverage of the war by the RT, Anadolu Agency, and Press TV. However, the government's attempt to influence and persuade the domestic and international audiences was concentrated on debunking TPLF's claims regarding the course of the war. Although government communication on critical issues was coming from multiple government sources, it was mainly a reactive engagement that aimed at countering claims through both the mainstream and the digital media communications (Tofa et al., 2022).

Thus, while lack of access to international media networks was the major limitation in addressing foreign audiences, the localized nature of the government media landscape and fragmented government structure prevented a unified national narrative and discourse. The Prime Minister's Office (PMO), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Ministry of

Government Communication Services (MGSCS), government-affiliated media personalities, Ethiopian embassies abroad, and delegations in multi-governmental institutions tried to debunk unfavorable comments from Western governments, international media networks, and regional and international institutions. Added to this chaotic scenario, the urgent need to address the foreign audience brought digital diplomacy to the forefront of public diplomacy engagements. The ‘digital diplomacy’ refers to the use of information and communication technologies for the purpose of diplomacy, and it has been interchangeably called virtual diplomacy, e-diplomacy, mobile diplomacy, cyber diplomacy, and networked diplomacy (Wekesa et al., 2021).

Digital diplomacy has emerged as an important foreign policy tool in Africa, allowing mass and instant public communications, circumventing the international knowledge structure (Masters, 2021). However, digital diplomacy in Africa faces several challenges, including media illiteracy, negative attitudes, polarization, hate speech, and poor policy (Endong, 2020). The mixed nature of the digital platform was evident during the war in Ethiopia, which, although it allowed easy access to the foreign audience, was full of hate speech and promoted extreme violence. Social media was weaponized, and the war was fought both on the ground and online, worsening the already ethnic-based fractures and polarizations among the Ethiopian society (Haile, 2024; Mafu, 2024). In the last decade, digital media has become the main platform of political dialogue, and the parties in the conflict in recent wars use the platform to justify their cases, rally support, and shape how events are perceived not only by the domestic audience but also by the international community.

The flexibility and multilingual nature of the digital media allowed the engagement of users residing both domestically and abroad. The TPLF-led EPRDF has used the digital platform to shape opinions with covertly organized social media campaigns via local languages of a group called Digital Woyane that worked to influence the direction of political change and discourses. This group is believed to have continued to operate its pro-TPLF engagements once the internal power transition occurred with the coming to power of Abiy Ahmed in April 2018 (Zehnder, 2020). Some observers also mention that PP has its own social media activists, which some estimate is over thirty thousand members. In addition to the struggle

to win the domestic war of information, during the war in Northern Ethiopia, major digital campaigns in English played a role in shaping foreign opinion. Solidarity with African states and developing regions was one of the defining features of Ethiopia's public diplomacy at the time. At some point, there emerged a sign of solidarity as it was seen in the protest of former French colonies, including Niger and Mali, against the continuing French influence in their domestic affairs.

There is also a digital war of information associated with ongoing wars in the Amhara and Oromia regions, mainly seen in affiliated mainstream media, YouTube and Facebook. Digital diplomacy is receiving more attention both in Ethiopia and globally because it provides the advantages of cost, flexibility, and accessibility for states that have limited mainstream media access to reach foreign audiences. There are a few studies that examined the place of digital diplomacy in Ethiopia's international relations, focusing on its role in promoting national interest (Ayenew, 2024), national image and branding and challenges (Bilate, 2002). Digital diplomacy empowered non-state actors in Ethiopia, as the ethnic-based polarized politics has several political establishments that have their own domestic and foreign constituency and affiliation used to communicate with the foreign audience via international languages, mainly English. Thus, unlike the mainstream media, the government has less control on digital diplomacy as it is evident in the use of non-state actors to influentially shape public opinion both at the domestic and international level, not only in Ethiopia but also in countries like Sudan, Kenya and Somalia.

The diaspora has played critical roles both in digital diplomacy and in supporting the government's crisis diplomacy (Manor & Adiku, 2021). In Africa, Diasporas were considered as traitors that have betrayed their countries at times of difficulty in pursuit of a luxurious life. However, in the last decades, states that have a considerable number of diasporas have used them as a bridge to connect with the Western states' policy makers (Brinkerhoff, 2019). Major social media campaigns of the government side, including the "No More" movement, which reached its peak in November 2021, involved demonstrations of the diaspora in dozens of cities, accompanied by its social media dimension mainly on Facebook and Twitter. The movement also used other mottos like

“Hands off Ethiopia,” and it used anti-colonial and pan-African ideas to denounce the increasing pressure on the Ethiopian government from the West during the conflict. A similar response was waged against the “Ethiopia Stabilization, Peace, and Democracy Act (H.R. 6600) bill of the Congress of the USA, which aimed at imposing harsh sanctions on Ethiopia in security and economic assistance (ENA, 2022).

Generally, the war in Northern Ethiopia and continuing wars in the Amhara and Oromia regions can be taken as a turning point in the integration of digital diplomacy and communication with conventional diplomacy. Involving both domestic and diaspora communities, the digital was not only polarized, ethnified, and centralized compared to mainstream public diplomacy communications but also empowered non-state actors to engage in foreign communication. The diaspora has the advantage of communicating with international actors directly, receives more attention from the international media, and employs international language. No significant development has been seen in terms of enhancing the language and media landscape of the public mass media and public efforts to understand, enhance and professionalize diplomacy, and public diplomacy are not seen. within the current media and language setup, Ethiopia's soft power and ability to shape its narrative through strategic communication on the global stage are critically limited.

8. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated how international language and media barriers affected the practice of public diplomacy in Ethiopia. Specifically, the study assessed the trend of language use in Ethiopia’s modern diplomatic history, examined the impact of localization of language in Ethiopia’s mass media on public diplomacy communications, and analyzed the role of public diplomacy in addressing recent foreign diplomacy challenges with a particular focus on digital diplomacy. The assessment of change and continuity in diplomatic language use in Ethiopia showed that starting from the second half of the 19th century, Amharic, Arabic, French, English and Italian were used in diplomatic communications. From the assertion of Ethiopia’s statehood in 1896 to the dominance of English in the post-WWII era, the fall of the Haile Selassie diplomatic communication was multi-lingual, with the use of English, French, and Italian. This period also saw the introduction of mass media in Ethiopia as

radio and television broadcasts were set up by the Italian and British companies, respectively.

However, a deliberate attempt to influence foreigners was initially tried through the printing press by communicating the perspectives of the government, mainly to foreigners living in Ethiopia. In this regard, the study found that the printing press was more diverse in language and targeted a foreign audience better than electronic media. The question of language in public life is a sensitive and critical question in Ethiopia, as mainstream media and government communications are dominantly in the local language, particularly in Amharic. Thus, the unique feature of the relation between language, mass media, and public diplomacy in Ethiopia is the fact that local languages are dominant mass media, thereby affecting public diplomacy communications. The mass media in Ethiopia works for local consumption as it is unable to employ an international language to influence and persuade a foreign audience. Moreover, the mass media in Ethiopia is divided across ethnic-based regional and sub-regional ownerships, creating a fragmented landscape that cannot have a united national narrative.

Thus, mass media is localized, fragmented, and isolated from the international flow of information, thereby making it irrelevant for public diplomacy strategic communications. State-affiliated mass media are also consumed by propagandistic government information concerning domestic political, economic, and security issues for domestic consumption rather than engaging the global audience. The study showed that digital media is complementing the limitations of the government in terms of reaching out to international audiences through mainstream media. Though the effect of the digital platforms on Ethiopia's public diplomacy needs further research, this study has shown that it is the main ground where alternative opinions are set, discourses narrated and debated not only by major parties of the conflict but also with the involvement of foreign audiences from academia, media, politics, and advocacy establishments. Thus, digital diplomacy as part of public diplomacy is running in a volatile and constantly evolving fashion as agendas shift based on the interests of the actors and in line with the unfolding of political, security, and other events. Thus, beyond filling the gaps of the mainstream media in reaching out to the

international audience, digital diplomacy cannot replace the strategic communication needs of the state.

This study has tried to show a glimpse of the Ethiopian public diplomacy challenges in terms of directing the right language and media outlet to promote national interest in a complex domestic, regional, and international terrain. Further studies that go beyond the impact of digitalization of communication can uncover overlooked aspects of Ethiopian public diplomacy including comparative studies how language and media are operating within public diplomacy in states with similar conditions, the impact of domestic challenges on projecting unified national image at global stage, the role of non-Western international media in shaping favorable attitude in the global audience, and the limitations of the Ethiopian public diplomacy machinery in terms of strategically engaging the foreign audience. Comparative public diplomacy understanding and practice across the Ethiopian governments also helps to understand the roots of current challenges and point out future directions.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, other measures that will help to address barriers of communication in public diplomacy are:

Constructing a united national narrative by addressing political challenges:

Addressing domestic political challenges is the most critical prerequisite to avoid fragmentation and to construct a united national discourse through public diplomacy that effectively promotes national interest. Thus, the possibility of effective instrumentalization of public diplomacy that targets an international audience requires strengthening the national unit by finding a solution to existing wars.

Shifting from reactive to proactive public diplomacy strategy: This requires the designing of a well-articulated strategy that enhances language and media outreach of public diplomacy voices not only to address foreign policy challenges that emanate from domestic affairs, mainly wars in North Ethiopia, Amhara, and Oromia. But long-term

public diplomacy that promotes national interest in the volatile region of the Horn of Africa is increasingly changing the global political economy.

Directing of national media towards engaging foreign audience: the current media landscape in Ethiopia is less relevant to public diplomacy because of its language, limited outreach to the international audience, and huge emphasis on domestic politics. Thus, there is a need to make the existing media a tool of disseminating voices that promote national interest by enhancing international language coverage, promoting united discourse on critical national interest agendas, and constructive discourse domestically.

Enhancing the capacity of the existing diplomatic setting: The existing government diplomatic infrastructure is ineffective in terms of contributing to the achievement of foreign policy objectives by engaging in strategic communication using digital media, international language, and available international outlets. This diplomatic structure of the state should go beyond engaging in domestic debates in the local language and focus on the international audience.

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