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News media and political contestation in the Somali territories: defining the parameters of a transnational digital public

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News media and political contestation in the Somali territories: defining the parameters of a transnational digital public

This article examines the extent to which different forms and technologies of media production facilitate popular participation in a ‘digital public’ across the politically fragmented Somali territories. Based on textual analysis of local media and comparative examination of news production and consumption, the article emphasises the dual character of the public sphere in the Somali context. Here, local media production centred in individual capitals of various political administrations coexists and overlaps with a transnational arena of Somali-language broadcasting and debate from various externally-based media networks. In this distinctive Somali media ecology, multiple forms of ‘old’ media intersect with digital technologies that have emerged throughout the post-1991 period of statelessness, conflict and political reconfiguration. Local public spheres of media production and public engagement help create state-like identities and political imaginaries. Nonetheless, these are articulated in the wider transnational Somali-language digital public that such administrations have limited ability to control. In this context certain notions of a transnational ‘Somali’ ethnolinguistic or religio-cultural community are maintained not in spite of conflict and fragmentation, but rather as a result of a media ecology and digital public that itself exists as an outcome of political instability and flux.

Keywords: Digital media; Somalia; social media; conflict; public sphere

Introduction

Sitting in a café in Hargeysa in the late afternoon, customers are chatting, checking their smartphones, drinking tea, and watching the television mounted in the corner. ‘Officially’ Hargeysa is a large city in northwest Somalia, but to most people here it is the capital of the Republic of Somaliland – independent, but internationally unrecognized, since 1991. The set is tuned to Universal TV, a private Somali-language news channel whose headquarters is in London. The news readers, reporters, and scrolling ticker describe events across the region and beyond. A road has been opened, a politician has been welcomed at an airport, a bomb has gone off. These events are presented as happening everywhere from Wajir to Wajaale,

Jowhar to Jigjiga, Bosaaso to Bristol, Mogadishu to Minneapolis. These places are spread across five different nation states - or six if you include the Republic of Somaliland - with some located in the various *de facto* autonomous regional administrations that make up 'Somalia' itself. They are linked - implicitly in their seamless presentation by the journalists - by the fact that they are all home to people who consider themselves to be Somalis and speak the Somali language. The reporter doesn't (and doesn't need to) tell the audience that Wajir is in Kenya or that Jowhar is in Somalia, though he might later mention the respective governments of those states as actors in the story. People in each of those places are potential consumers of this content, and may call into the channel or engage with it through social media. Somebody changes the channel to Somaliland National Television. Alongside the links to its Facebook or Youtube channels, a different range of iconography is displayed and a different political-geographical lexicon is used by its presenters. SLNTV is the state broadcaster of an unrecognised state: it covers events in the capital of the Republic of Somaliland, in its political institutions, or in the villages of the districts of its regions.

Universal TV and SLNTV are just two channels that form part of the expansive transnational network of Somali-language digital media. This is made up of multiple state and private satellite television channels, dozens of radio stations and almost countless online news sites. Possible shared engagement in all of this is facilitated by multimedia internet broadcasting and cross-cutting social media platforms. Conceptualising this 'digital public' across the Somali Horn of Africa requires an appreciation of distinct dynamics of political contestation and media production, which are themselves the result of prolonged instability and processes of state-reconstruction. Across the political administrations that (still) make-up the juridical idea of 'Somalia' there exists a dual public sphere of news media production, consumption and popular engagement. Here, local media production centred in individual capitals of various political administrations (such as The Federal Government of Somalia, the

autonomous Puntland State of Somalia, or the *de facto* independent Republic of Somaliland) coexists and overlaps with a transnational arena of Somali-language broadcasting and debate. This is dominated by various externally-based Somali-language media networks active on the ground in the Somali Horn of Africa. The former aspect of this ‘dual’ public sphere can be conceived of as local media covering politics in and around the aforementioned centres of various state-like administrations or secessionist territories. The latter encompasses a variety of transnational Somali-language media producers who broadcast across these political boundaries. Their content is consumed and engaged with in an online digital public by audiences and political actors in each location.

‘Transnational’ here does not simply mean ‘diasporic’ as both levels of this public sphere involve internationally-mobile and locally-based participants. Furthermore, this duality is conceptualised in political rather than technological terms. Media producers at both the local and transnational levels of Somali political generate and reproduce content using different means. A vast array of audio-visual and print media production (found in radio and television broadcasts, news articles and editorials) is regularly digitalised into an online Somali-language media environment accessible in the Somali territories and in the diaspora. Social media platforms such as Youtube and Facebook intersect and overlap with this content and these networks, further blurring distinctions between ‘new’ and ‘traditional’ media. At the same time, the high levels of mobility of elite producers within media networks complicate distinctions between ‘diasporic’ and ‘local’ media. Although local media networks create specific discourse and important ‘imagined communities’¹ around particular Somali political projects, the focus of this article is on a macro-level transnational digital public. This intersects with the local, but also provides avenues for popular political engagement for media consumers digitally exposed to an international Somali-language digital public.

Political fragmentation and media production/consumption are contextualised below across three research sites: capital cities of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), Puntland, and Somaliland – Mogadishu (*Muqdisho*), Garoowe, and Hargeysa. The article proceeds to demonstrate how multiple forms of traditional and new, local and diasporic media coalesce into a transnational Somali-language digital public. The operational dynamics of this digital public are then outlined with examples demonstrating popular engagement with political issues through overlapping news and social media. Data from two specific (but, I argue, characteristic) examples of Facebook engagement with a major external Somali-language broadcaster is presented to illustrate some of the ways in which Somalis from across and beyond the territories express themselves in this multi-media digital public. The article argues that distinctive technological and political developments of Somali media have created a transnational space in which different political projects are debated, reaffirmed and contested with reference to notions of the wider (and culturally, religiously and ethno-linguistically defined) ‘Somali’ Horn of Africa.

Observations presented here are informed by the author’s research and professional experiences of media consumption in different parts of the Somali Horn of Africa since 2009². Six-months of fieldwork was undertaken in 2015 comprising of content analysis of a sample of news and social media texts from (or associated with) the three cities; 40 semi-structured interviews with media-producers and government officials; questionnaire data collection from 325 university students in these three locations; and nine focus groups discussions with male and female undergraduates³. Logistical and security constraints limited the scope of my doctoral research on media consumption to the social category of ‘students’ and no claims are made about the representativeness of this sample for the totality of urban and rural Somali society. Nonetheless, this data is contextualised with wider analysis of texts in the networked media environment. Furthermore, students in the booming Somali

tertiary education sector are an important part of a generation of young people who have grown up in a politically fragmented Somalia and have had no direct experience of the unitary post-colonial state. Young people also represent a high proportion of media producers and consumers within the wider Somali digital public and are thus an important group in the context of the rapidly changing information environment.

Public sphere theory and the Somali case

Modern theorisation of Habermas' venerable concept of the 'public sphere' continues to grapple with the rise of the internet: decentred 'networks of networks' providing citizens with multiple digital fora in which to debate, shape new identities, and mobilise in 'counter-publics'⁴. Western-focused scholarship is currently scrambling to account for the complexities of the modern information environment that challenge core concepts of gate-keeping and framing in media studies and dominate popular discussions of 'post-truth' political communication⁵. In African media studies the usefulness of the basic Habermasian public sphere framework has long been questioned in light of global technological change and experiences of postcolonial state-building. Much of this literature focuses on the potentials of citizens' technological engagement with the state in promoting or strengthening democratisation, or inculcating (or providing avenues for resistance against) liberal subjectivities⁶. This scholarship often transcends teleological conceptualisations of journalists' contributions to the democratisation and 'good governance' agendas of global liberalism. Hasty, for instance, usefully emphasises the contradictions inherent in journalists' understanding of their roles as 'objective watchdogs of liberal discourse...who are necessarily and routinely implicated in a political culture of power and privilege that straddles both public and private spheres'⁷.

Nonetheless, much of this literature has necessarily focused on contexts where juridically recognised states have a degree of control over their territories and the electoral processes that take place nationally. Post-colonial African states are often characterised in terms of ethno-linguistic diversity, urban/rural cleavages and the efforts of authoritarian, post-authoritarian, or hybrid regimes to control the potential for resistance generated in emerging digital publics, or harness such technology for their own ends⁸. Across the Somali territories, however, the combination of prolonged state collapse, conditions of statelessness, and the development of multiple new and competing administrative entities is the most obvious difference observable in comparison to a continental standard of unitary (if weak or contested) statehood.

Furthermore, the Somali digital public Somalia is built largely around the fact of *relative* ethno-linguistic homogeneity. ‘Standard’ Somali (the *Af Maxaa Tiri* dialect) as formalised by Siyaad Barre’s military regime in 1972 serves as a lingua franca for public sphere communication and the vast majority of media are broadcast in this dialect. It provides the linguistic basis by which transnational Somali-language broadcasting and popular engagement with media operates across the different political administrations of the region. This is not to suggest that differences in dialect (or ‘minority’ ethno-linguistic groups) are unimportant. Whether defined in terms of ‘Somali’ lineage-group grievances, ethno-linguistic or racial distinctions (the position of *Af Maay* dialect speakers, or the diverse groups of people referred to as the ‘Bantu’ or *Jareer* populations), the marginalisation of various groups is a feature of unresolved legacies of the post-colonial unitary state experience, state collapse, civil war and ongoing political reconfiguration⁹. The construction of ideas of a certain degree of ‘Somali’ cultural, religious and linguistic homogeneity is a complicated legacy of the post-colonial state-building experience. It is also both a result of - and a prerequisite for - the modern, transnational Somali-language digital public.

Debate within the public sphere has long been theorised to play a crucial role in defining community parameters and norms. Calhoun has argued that Habermas' notion of actors entering into a public sphere with pre-defined (if bracketed) identities, equipped to engage in rational-critical dialogue, appeared either as a Euro-centric abstraction or as an unrealistic assessment of the actual dynamics of the classical 'coffee-house' model itself¹⁰. This critique recognised the unanticipated resilience of modern forms of nationalism in the post-Cold War era, flourishing alongside (and not in spite of) globalisation. There have been different ways to respond to this apparent theoretical blind-spot on the role of 'rational' argumentation, one of which is highlighted in Wedeen's conceptualisation of 'mini-publics' in Yemen. These, she argues, facilitate the emergence of what she describes as non-liberal democratic subjectivities through deliberative spaces¹¹. Another response seen in the Africanist literature involves jettisoning the public-sphere label altogether, replacing it with the concept of 'popular culture', which, for Barber, is characterised by the arts as a channel for public communications, outside of the formal media limelight dominated by elites¹². Willems notes that 'an advantage of conceptualising sites of popular culture as publics is that it avoids Habermas' elitist connotation of his concept of the public sphere – popular culture often engages, interacts and responds to official debates'¹³.

A problem with using this conceptualisation of popular culture as a site of contestation for the Somali case is that it relies on a fairly clear division between 'official' (state) and 'unofficial' (popular) debates. This distinction - in the context of modern Somali media and prolonged political fragmentation or effective statelessness - is often blurred and ambiguous. Furthermore, the emergence of competing Somali 'state' actors (often out of conditions of statelessness) complicates discussions of counter-publics in that there is no single coherent state against which a religious, ideological or cultural counter-public can clearly define itself. Fragmented counter-publics aligned against local political projects or

broader processes of national state reconfiguration do exist, with one obvious example being the sophisticated digital public activity of Harakaat Al Shabaab Al Mujahidiin (Al Shabaab), which wages war on ‘apostate’ foreign-backed administrations across Somalia. Nevertheless, the notion of a distinct counter-public is problematic in this case for several reasons. These include broader histories of Islamist mobilisation and popular cultural identification that transcend Al Shabaab as an individual ideological actor; the lack of explicit state promotion of secularism; and the aforementioned public sphere of communications and debate encompassing multiple political projects.

The political context of a digital public

Mogadishu retains its symbolic status as capital of the post-colonial Somali state and remains the seat of the Federal Government of Somalia installed in 2012. The FGS has succeeded – with the help of African Union Mission for Somalia forces (AMISOM) and the ‘international community’ – in establishing a modicum of control over all of the districts of the capital. Formal Al Shabaab governance of neighbourhoods in Mogadishu ended with their expulsion in 2011, and FGS/AMISOM/US efforts to dislodge the Islamist militants from remaining south-central Somali strongholds continue to the present. However, attacks by Al Shabaab continue in Mogadishu and the insurgency remains undefeated.

The FGS has moved towards the reconfiguration of the Somali state along ‘federal’ lines as outlined in 2012’s Provisional Constitution. This often fraught process has been at times led from Mogadishu, and at others spurred by developments in the regions largely outside of the control of power-holders in the capital¹⁴. A delayed indirect election process for the legislative and executive branches of government was completed by early 2017. This involved clan elders in the (often nascent) federal regions selecting electoral-college

delegates to choose MPs, who in turn elected the new President Maxamed Cabdilaahi ‘Farmaajo’ (a US-Somali dual citizen) in February 2017.

Since 2012, significant economic change has been visible in Mogadishu. With the promise of greater security, local business sectors and the real-estate market have flourished, driven by returnee diaspora investors as well as infrastructure projects undertaken by foreign donors such as Turkey. A *dib-u-dhis* (reconstruction) discourse is a powerful phenomenon in imaginations both *of* and *about* the nation¹⁵. Viewed through the lenses of international mainstream media and a powerful social media environment in which many politically engaged Somalis are active, the battle-lines of this discursive contest are clear: between portrayals of Mogadishu and Somalia that emphasise tropes of conflict, terrorism, piracy and humanitarian suffering, and those that showcase the achievements of a changing nation.

Garoowe is the political capital of the Puntland State of Somalia, a quasi-autonomous administration formed in 1998 with the stated intention of integrating into a federal Somali state when the conditions to do so are deemed appropriate. Puntland currently represents the most fully formed and functional example of a Somali federal (regional) state without secessionist aspirations. Since its establishment as a political settlement between the mainly Majeerteen sub-clans (of the more broadly conceived Daarood clan-family) who inhabit the north-east, the Puntland State of Somalia has developed many institutions of statehood. Handovers of political power have been facilitated peacefully albeit indirectly through the votes of the legislature (*Golaha Wakiilada*) as opposed to the popular suffrage put into practice in the Republic of Somaliland’s elections.

Despite its stated fidelity to the idea of a re-unified Somalia, Puntland has maintained an ambiguous and often antagonistic relationship with the FGS in Mogadishu. In jockeying for position in the ongoing federalisation process the Puntland administration has a clear idea of its interests, has shown itself willing to periodically sever relations with Mogadishu, and

often accuses southern actors of political intrigue around its borders. Such real-politick overlaps with clan-inflected narratives surrounding the unreconciled legacy of the Somali civil war that led to the overthrow of Siyaad Barre's regime in 1991¹⁶. Perceptions that Hawiye sub-clans 'took' Mogadishu from a military dictator associated with certain sub-clans of the Daarood are still voiced by political actors and remain relevant in a turbulent context where the future centres of gravity of a re-emerging Somali state are currently being defined.

By contrast, Somaliland's unambiguous claim of secession is grounded in the juridical existence of the former British Protectorate that joined in union with the Italian South to form the Somali Republic in 1960. The revocation of this union is based on the experience of resistance to Siyaad Barre's regime and the marginalisation and extreme persecution faced by the predominantly Isaaq sub-clans of the north-west¹⁷. Political development in the territory has produced distinctive institutional frameworks for governance and relatively democratic and peaceful transitions of power. Delayed presidential and parliamentary elections were contested again through the state's tripartite system in November 2017. The incumbent President Axmed Maxamed Maxmuud 'Silaanyo' did not stand for re-election and his party colleague, Muuse Bixi Cabdi, prevailed in a relatively free, fair, and peaceful election¹⁸.

The emergence of Somaliland as an independent and increasingly sovereign actor remains a controversial project both within the region and in certain parts of the territory itself. The relative ease of access combined with the apparent dynamism of political and economic development have made Hargeysa a hub for researchers and a burgeoning literature exists emphasising Somaliland's distinctive post-civil war trajectory¹⁹. With this in mind, it is important to clarify the political-geographical focus of this article's analysis. Many people in the Republic of Somaliland would object to the discussion of their independent state in such a comparative analysis, in that its very inclusion might suggest that Somaliland was but another 'region' of the Somalia that many people in the northwest want desperately to detach

themselves from. This is an identifiable discursive strategy which, conversely, prompts this article's explicitly comparative focus.

Furthermore, media in Hargeysa discuss and comment on 'Somalia' in particular ways (often emphasising instability, or omitting mention of it), and these constructions of the 'other' play a significant role in the foundational discourses of Somaliland's history, political identity, development and current status. However, Somaliland is not entirely detached from the transnational Somali-language digital public, and here constitutes a subject for political debate. In Mogadishu and Garoowe media and political commentators use different modes of expression for their discussions of Somaliland, each other, and other locations of political influence. Often these codes and associated debates explicitly engage the notion of the Somali Ummah (*Ummadda Soomaaliyeed*). This religiously defined transnational ethno-polity is of importance to many commentators in each of the locations studied and incorporates notions of a wider imagined ethno-community of 'Greater Somalia', split by colonial borders and power politics between Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and the post-colonial state of Somalia²⁰. The importance of this regional politics of naming is heightened by the diverse means through which debate across these boundaries is engaged.

Media production

The news media market across the contemporary Somali Horn is characterised by great diversity and fragmentation. Radio broadcasting (and external media influence) across the far-flung Somali territories predominantly inhabited by nomadic pastoralists has a historical lineage dating back to the British colonial era²¹. Although the younger urban generation might regard radio as a medium associated with their parents or grandparents, FM broadcasting continues to be the most accessible means of receiving information for a majority of the population in both urban and rural settings. The perception that radio remains

the primary media of the masses also explains why it is radio broadcasters who are most frequently affected by states' sporadic or persistent attempts at control or censorship. This is evident in law in Somaliland where private (local) FM radio broadcasting is prohibited by a state in fear of the proliferation of broadcasters representing highly sectional clan constituencies²². By comparison, in Mogadishu's more fluid private radio market there were around 30 FM stations broadcasting daily (as of mid 2015).

Satellite-connected TVs are standard features in practically all moderately affluent homes and are ubiquitous in all manner of restaurants and cafes. Often connected via Arab-world linked receivers, Somali-language broadcasting makes up only a small proportion of the total number of (the hundreds of) channels available. Networks such as Universal TV, Horn Cable and Somali Channel dominate this segment of the market and are often based in the diaspora. Rolling news coverage of events in Somalia, issues affecting the global Somali community and world news dominates their output. Also common are political debates as well as cultural programming featuring poets and musicians (often from the pre-1991 era). Punctuating all this, the globalised market of the *Ummadda Soomaaliyeed* is continuously invoked in constant advertisements for everything from Somali doctors in St. Paul, to mattresses in Mogadishu, or nappies in Nairobi.

In the post-independence era newspapers did not have the same status or coverage of radio due to logistical difficulties of national distribution and low levels of literacy. During this period newspapers remained an elite, urban and state-controlled enterprise, epitomised by the nationalist mouthpiece of Barre's regime, *Xidigta Oktoobar* (The October Star). State collapse was followed by a profusion of newspaper publishing in the capital and the publications that emerged at this time often served as the mouthpieces of the various clan-based factions vying for power. This profusion of newspaper publishing in Mogadishu was not sustained through the subsequent period characterised, from the late 1990s, by a stateless

status-quo of factional power-sharing and the development of neighbourhood Islamic courts structures. By the time the embryonic Islamic Courts Union had been overthrown by the US-backed Ethiopian invasion of 2006, virtually no newspapers were being printed in the city²³. In Mogadishu today, only two daily papers are published. In Hargeysa, the fall of Barre's regime also precipitated an explosion of private newspaper printing. Unlike in Mogadishu, the Somaliland's more stable environment allowed for this to be sustained²⁴. Despite tight profit margins and competition from online news, more than 10 papers are now published daily or weekly in the city²⁵.

Print media overlaps into Somali cyberspace, a vast and predominantly unregulated space of information and entertainment content dissemination. The rapid expansion of mobile telecommunications across the territories in the post state-collapse period is a topic that has been emphasised by numerous commentators, often those with an enthusiastic interest in the anarcho-capitalist development of private, cheap, efficient and widespread mobile connectivity²⁶. The high level of social penetration of mobile phones across society and the bypassing of older statist institutions of public communication has brought with it an widespread infrastructure of internet connectivity. Whilst internet cafes are still important centres for the (young) masses to get online and plug into these worlds of news-media or social networking, the rapid expansion of mobile internet technology has meant that online activity is an increasingly privatised experience. The online realm, which encompasses and re-broadcasts the established mediums of radio and TV, is accessible through the ubiquitous smartphone.

The online news media market is made up of hundreds of localised news websites all competing for traffic. In the author's surveys conducted amongst 325 university student respondents in Mogadishu, Garoowe and Hargeysa, when asked which Somali-language news website they used most often, participants gave 64 different answers. Although there

are clearly certain news websites which are more popular in these different areas amongst this generation, the sheer number of possible news sources reflects media production by *hebel* *hebel* ('every so and so'). As one male student in Puntland State University explained:

'...the number of websites has [firstly] to do with making money – adverts for telecom companies, construction, for business purposes. The other [reason] is about name. Everyone has a website. Everything is *hebel.com*, *hebel.net*. And so many are just for propaganda.'²⁷

Despite the multiplicity of competing online platforms and the presence of a large number that represent very specific sectional views or constituencies, a significant proportion of these sites are updated regularly with breaking news and the uploading of opinion pieces. This is indicative of the large numbers of people involved in these processes both in the diaspora - where many websites are hosted and where the website owner may reside - and in Somalia, where the site will characteristically employ a small number of journalists who may write exclusively for that site or act in a freelance capacity²⁸. A *laissez faire* attitude towards intellectual copyright allows for content to be copied and spread across different online platforms. Although some sites are configured to prevent the lifting of their copy this practice is often tolerated as 'the way things are done' to generate content and thus the hits important to the advertisers who provide a significant amount of the financing for such operations²⁹.

At the same time, globally ubiquitous social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube intersect with this private Somali news media production. That networks directly share their content on these platforms, or that prominent politicians, intellectuals or activists use Facebook as a primary means of circulating opinion pieces, complicates straightforward distinctions between 'social' and 'traditional' or 'professional' media. This blurring occurs in a context already characterised by extreme fragmentation, privatisation and a lack of commercial or state media monopolies.

In categorising the media networks operating *across* the different technological formats, social media platforms, and commercial markets, it is possible to distinguish

between three main types of producers. All of these networks overlap into (and thus help create) a Somali-language digital public, the operational dynamics of which I explore below. First in this typology come private local media companies whose range of broadcast is limited to specific urban centres and regional territories (websites that fall into this category are accessible anywhere but tend to have readerships interested in particular areas). Although this type of media may have financing or even staff in the diaspora, it is important to distinguish such operations from the second category in this typology: big externally-headquartered television stations. These, crucially, have ‘national’ coverage and a broad viewership - an archetype being the London-based Universal TV that is popular across the territories. Similar to the latter in terms of scope and broad appeal - but distinct in their management structures and relationship with ‘international’ media - are the Somali services of the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Voice of America. These are accessed online and via radio, broadcast through dedicated shortwave frequencies and rebroadcast on various private FM station.

A third category could be labelled ‘state’ media, referring to the broadcasting of the FGS (Somali National Television/Radio Mogadishu), the Puntland State of Somalia (Puntland Television) and the Republic of Somaliland (Somaliland National Television/Radio Hargeysa). These stations consider themselves distinct from private media and carry government messaging. In some cases they also receive direct foreign assistance from donor governments. Puntland TV - whose Somali slogan describes it as ‘servant and defender of Puntland’s interests’ - has received financial and technical assistance from the Italian Government. This demonstrates certain foreign states’ willingness to engage with (what are in theory) sub-state administrations to build governance capacity³⁰.

The transnationalism of this multimedia production and consumption, as well as engagement in a digital public, must be viewed in the context of physical mobility. Diaspora

figures are important actors in public life and recent accounts capture both the non-linear movements of ‘revolving returnees’, as well as local-diaspora tensions around cultural norms and competition in local job markets³¹. The internationalised nature of urban public sphere settings is highlighted not only through the consumption of externally-produced media (Somali or non-Somali), but also in the content of ‘local’ news. Newspapers frequently feature international news of relevance to diaspora communities or locals who may have family members abroad. Taken from foreign media and translated or commented on, this print and online content frequently explores controversies in Europe. During my fieldwork these ranged from commentary on British ‘anti-radicalisation’ education policies, to discussion of inflammatory statements made in the European media about migration³². Where the focus is not Europe or North America a common theme is human-interest or religious-related stories from the wider Islamic world, particularly the Gulf States where many Somalis reside and which are often presented as potential exemplars of successful Muslim economic development. Such internationalisation of content reflects the media links which exist between the Horn and its diaspora, but also contributes to locally produced ideas of a truly global *Ummadda Soomaaliyeed*, a trope that discursively structures many popular engagements in a broader Somali digital public³³.

Media ‘freedom’ across a digital public

The dynamism of Somali-language media production should not obscure serious constraints facing journalists, which limit the content and circulation of news, and influence the parameters of the associated digital public. The profession is often seen as dominated by young men and although women are active in the field – including on dedicated stations committed to female rights and empowerment – the majority of correspondents are male. Women are often visible (or audible) as presenters on local TV or radio, whereas men tend to

be overrepresented in ‘front-line’ news collection, due to a combination of political, cultural, religious and security related factors³⁴. Many respondents in the focus groups I held in universities in Hargeysa, Garoowe and Mogadishu (including some who were part-time journalists themselves) believed that the industry was often staffed by under-qualified young men with few other prospects in local job markets. Perceiving the prerequisites for entry into a career in journalism to be possession of a mobile phone and an internet connection, many young journalists were said to be ill-equipped to deal with the different situations that they might encounter in complex political, commercial and security environments³⁵.

The National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ) regularly documents violence against journalists across the territories³⁶. Somaliland, of course, has its own Journalists’ organisations (e.g. SOLJA), as does Puntland (MAP). Nonetheless, NUSOJ’s publications attempt to maintain the notion of a ‘national’ (Somali) group of media workers and their reportage covers all territories regardless of the organisation’s lack of official physical presence in the secessionist northwest. The 2014 NUSOJ annual report also includes alleged violations against ethnic Somali journalists inside Ethiopia. Here the ‘national’ encompasses an ethnic solidarity amongst a journalistic fraternity, a practical example of the trans-border sensibility of a popular ethno-political imagination that is a feature of the wider digital public. Since the establishment of the FGS there have been several high profile arrests, detentions, prosecutions and convictions of journalists in Mogadishu, ostensibly for reporting information that has ‘incited’ popular discontent directed against the state.

Legal frameworks regulating journalistic conduct remain ambiguous despite the ratification in January 2016 of the Somali Media Law. This includes vague provisions that journalists should ‘avoid the dissemination or publication of videos and photos that are against the sound conduct of the society’³⁷. Ambiguities give the state significant leeway to prosecute individuals where it sees fit. Although the security contexts of media in Garoowe

or Hargeysa are somewhat less conflicted than Mogadishu, the ability of certain Somali-language media networks to broadcast across the region is of concern for each of the different political authorities exercising or asserting sovereignty. It is often these ‘external’ Somali-language networks that come into most frequent conflict with state administrations in Mogadishu, Garoowe and Hargeysa. Puntland authorities, for instance, have on several occasions suspended the operations of various external radio and television broadcasters (such as VOA, or Somali National TV from Mogadishu) usually under the pretext that they have disseminated false information, particularly with regards to internal Puntland politics or reporting of Puntland’s relationship with Mogadishu³⁸. Furthermore, authorities in Garoowe, Hargeysa and Mogadishu have *all* made sporadic moves against broadcasters such as Universal TV for various alleged transgressions (with instances of office closures or arrests occurring in these capitals in 2013, 2014 and 2015, respectively). Although press freedom is popularly cited as an element of Somaliland’s democratic stability (itself a highly political narrative as the territory defines itself in contrast to the rest of ‘Somalia’), considerations of social stability and the legitimacy of state power are also important for both populations and the state in defining appropriate boundaries of media expression³⁹.

A transnational digital public in action

Media consumers in Somalia are increasingly plugged into digital media through mobiles and headphones, potentially sharing public space with other people but consuming different content. Gone are the days when a small range of authoritative news sources was relied upon by the majority of a ‘national’ audience. Nonetheless, these old standbys (such as the BBC) remain important, but depend on an increasingly diversified multi-media output. As such, audiences often interact online with such producers, and in a digital public will challenge and critique perceived political or regional biases. The perceived neutrality of external Somali-language media sources (particularly the BBC or VOA) was discussed with university focus

group participants in Hargeysa, Garoowe and Mogadishu. Although many students emphasised their respect for the technical capacity and professionalism of the staff of these organisations, arguments were also made about a lack of neutrality. This might be perceived in an over-emphasis on negative stories affecting the different territories, disproportionate numbers of staff from certain groups in powerful positions in these media organisations, a lack of representation of journalists on the ground in certain places, or perceptions of foreign or western influence or propaganda. Nonetheless, the fact that these critiques came from consumers from each of these different locations is an indication that networks like the BBC or VOA at least have an interest in making efforts towards editorial balance.

The amalgamation of media technologies facilitates popular engagement with content via the social media platforms utilised by major producers. Although class-based and urban-rural divides in internet connectivity impact on the extent to which conclusions can be generalised, the increasing ubiquity of affordable smart-phones and ever-expanding internet connectivity must be considered in regards to media consumption and engagement. Examination of popular social media engagement with major Somali-language news producers reveals significant activity both within the diaspora and within the Somali territories. For instance, a 2015 BBC Somali Service story uploaded to their Facebook page on the conviction of Shabelle Media journalists in Mogadishu generated 452 comments within three hours of its posting⁴⁰. People who comment on these BBC Facebook posts frequently give their location, and of the 215 individuals that did, the majority (55%) stated that they were in Somalia/Somaliland. Despite this being a story most closely relating to Mogadishu, the majority (56%) of those 'local' commentators stated that they were in cities and towns in Somaliland and Puntland. Although this analysis is limited to one particular story it corresponds with observations of media consumption, and interviews and focus

groups with producers/consumers, which indicate an audience for transnational Somali language media that is spread across the Somali territories and beyond.

Judging by names and Facebook profiles, only around 10% of the participants in the above discussion were female. Although analysis of comments on different BBC Facebook stories within the same timeframe have shown higher female participation (e.g. around 20% for a story on female genital cutting with a more clearly gendered theme⁴¹), a more detailed comment on gendered participation in this digital public is beyond the scope of this article. In this latter BBC Somali Service story, popular engagement focused on the choice of image used as an illustration - a graphic image of a young girl about to undergo the procedure. Debate ensued amongst a digital public in the Somali territories and in the diaspora around both around norms of media broadcasting and the substantive issue of the practice itself defined, often very explicitly, in 'Somali' religio-cultural terms.

Levels and geographical scope of engagement aside, to what extent does such interaction in a digital public equate to meaningful political agency? Answers to this vary across the diverse Somali political and security contexts. Only in Somaliland, for instance, do formal mechanisms for universal suffrage currently operate, and separate analysis is needed to chart the rapidly changing ways in which digital media access is impacting elections there⁴². This article, however, has focused on the transnational digital public and in this regard it is important to emphasise the sensitivity and activism of commentators across the territories towards external perceptions of Somalia's apparent instability.

Digital publics are therefore actively engaged in the construction of various counter-narratives emphasising different political or economic developments, critiquing alleged misrepresentations and providing examples of political or cultural extraversion. Several social media campaigns have criticised foreign media portrayals of Mogadishu, for instance the *#Someonetellmaryharper* hashtag, which took aim at the use by the BBC of a particular

image of the aftermath of an Al Shabaab attack to illustrate a story about Mogadishu's first International Book Fair. A questionable editorial choice of image undermined the eponymous foreign journalist's attempt to highlight a positive development in the city, and the furore generated a substantive BBC response⁴³. This campaign echoed the *#someonetellCNN* controversy in Kenya (in reaction to that network's depiction of the country as a 'hotbed of terror') and also corresponded with the emergence of *#Cadaanstudies* academic activism around the 'whiteness' of Somali-focused scholarship⁴⁴. Numerous other media and social media engagements attempt to challenge external perceptions of Somali instability. These have ranged from social media responses to Al Shabaab attacks on Liido Beach (*#Tweetlidopictures*) and Ugaaso Abokor's instagrammed promotion of daily life economic change in Mogadishu, to Somalilanders' narratives around the democratic development of Africa's 'Best Kept Secret'⁴⁵. Disaggregation of diasporic and local agency is again difficult, but what is of interest for analysis here is the way in which such campaigns play into a wider Somali-language public sphere that state-makers and citizens respond to and engage with.

At the same time, ongoing conflict - combined with unreconciled legacies of civil war-era violence - play out across the regional political boundaries of the Somali digital public and create conditions conducive for the propagation of clan-based hate speech and conspiracy theorisation. Media commentary – amplified and appropriated through social media conduits – can often be seen to rely on misinformation and epitomise questionable-journalistic practices. Once again, clear distinctions between professional journalism and popular commentary and debate break down in a context characterised by extreme privatisation and fragmentation of digital media spaces.

In January 2015 a story broke in the media across Somalia about the confiscation by Somaliland authorities of alleged military hardware discovered on board a Sudanese-registered ship docked at Berbera port. Certain online media networks (based in Mogadishu)

subsequently posted pictures allegedly taken during the Somaliland authorities' public display of this equipment. Although some of the images of armoured personnel carriers appeared potentially genuine, one picture of tanks bearing World War Two-era *Wehrmacht* insignia looked out of place. Through some basic internet research the source of the image was identified by the author: a UK website advertising a private collection of replica WWII vehicles⁴⁶. Although Somali online news media often uses 'stock' images, in this instance the headline was stating that the pictures had been taken at the scene in Berbera. With the ease of replication of online media content these images began appearing on numerous other sites and social media. This, in turn, prompted some commentators to remark on the 'Nazi' origins of the weaponry Somaliland was importing - as opposed to questioning the authenticity of the originally disseminated images themselves⁴⁷.

The UN arms embargo on Somalia renders such allegations a serious business, and the rhetoric coming from the Puntland government illustrated the stakes potentially involved. Puntland frequently alleges that Somaliland plays a covert role in supporting Al Shabaab's operations, and statements by the Puntland Security Minister (as reported in the Mogadishu media) expressed fears that that this materiel would end up in their possession⁴⁸. This prompted a response from Somaliland's defence minister lambasting the Puntland claims and, after discussions with the Sudanese Government, the ship was eventually released with the alleged military cargo reloaded.

There is, of course, often a sizeable distinction to be made between the rhetoric of such political actors and the actual incidence of conflict on the ground. Although Somaliland and Puntland *do* engage in sporadic skirmishes, this particular incident (shouted out from the distance of the various political centres) did not lead to a serious escalation in tension in the disputed regions of Sool and Sanaag, perhaps highlighting the primacy of local factors in this particular context⁴⁹. Nonetheless, it should be recognised that the combination of

instantaneous and transnational online media, and discursive and physical political distance between power centres in Somalia creates a digital public in which masses of information (or misinformation) can be selectively deployed and utilised by various, often anonymous actors.

Conclusion

Previous scholarship has emphasised the influence of the external *on* the local in the Somali context – whether through the recreation of conflict via diaspora-based media or the material impact of financial flows such as remittances⁵⁰. This article has examined a public sphere whereby transnationalisation of production or identity is a feature of media on the ground and impacts the way products are consumed, understood and utilised by actors within the Somali territories - whether they are ‘locals’ or diaspora ‘returnees’ themselves. This is not to underplay tensions which exist in public and political life in each of the research sites around the influence of such returnees. Nevertheless, definitional nuance is required to attribute greater agency to individuals in the Somali territories as globalised producers and consumers of media in urban public sphere(s) and within a digital public.

If this transnationalisation of content and the multi-directional mobility of many elite producers blurs dichotomies between diasporic and local agency, does it not therefore contradict this article’s definition of a *dual* Somali public sphere? Here a clear distinction is made between a public sphere operating within political centres serving as capitals of separate, if interlinked, political projects; and another made up of transnational Somali-language media networks. Transnational here is not merely synonymous with diasporic: crucially, *both* levels of this model involve diasporic and local participants, often through channels facilitated by digital media. The fact that such networks have both the technical capacity and audience appeal across all of the territories in question is significant for state actors attempting to discursively legitimise their different political projects or identities.

This article has analysed parameters, activities and potentials of a transnational digital public mobilised around an imagined ethno-linguistic community and engaged in Somali political realities. More work is required to compare such fora with those that exist at a more local level, producing and attempting to shape individual administrations that make up (or attempt to detach themselves from) the political patchwork that is ‘Somalia’. In this particular context, certain notions of a transnational Somali ethnolinguistic or religio-cultural community are maintained not in spite of conflict and fragmentation, but rather as a result of a media ecology and digital public that itself exists as an outcome of such political instability and flux. In this way, the Somali case demonstrates challenges for African digital publics scholarship to engage with highly distinct political contexts where the implications of popular media engagement may be similarly diverse.

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¹ Anderson, “Imagined Communities.”

² From 2009-2011, I was employed by the University of Hargeysa, and from 2012-2015, by a major international humanitarian organisation working primarily in south-central Somalia and Puntland.

³ University of Mogadishu, Puntland State University (Garowe) and Gollis University (Hargeysa). All interviews, surveys and focus groups were conducted in Somali.

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- ⁴ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*; Dean, “Cybersalons and Civil Society”; Poster, “CyberDemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere”.
- ⁵ Bennet and Pfetsch, “Rethinking Political Communication.”
- ⁶ Fraser, “Let’s be Responsible Citizens”; Mustapha, “The Public Sphere in 21st Century Africa”, 31; Nyamnjoh, *Africa’s Media*.
- ⁷ Hasty, *The Press and Political Culture*, 12.
- ⁸ Bernal, *Network as Nation*; Gagliardone, “New media and the developmental state”; Hammett, “Resistance, Power and Geopolitics in Zimbabwe”; Lynch, “After Egypt”; Ogone, “Intra-national Ethnic Diasporas”; Obadare & Willems, *Civic Agency in Africa*; Tomaselli, “Repositioning African Media Studies”.
- ⁹ Kapteijns, *Clan-cleansing in Somalia*; Ahmed, *The Invention of Somalia*; Besteman & Cassanelli, *The Struggle for Land in Southern Somalia*; Eno, Eno & Van Lehman, ‘Defining the Problem in Somalia’.
- ¹⁰ Calhoun, *Civil Society and the Public Sphere*, 279.
- ¹¹ Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*.
- ¹² Barber, *Readings in African Popular Culture*, 2.
- ¹³ Willems, “Interrogating Public Sphere”, 7.
- ¹⁴ Mosley, “Somalia’s Federal Future.”
- ¹⁵ Hammond, “Somalia Rising”.
- ¹⁶ Goobjooge, “*Dhageyso: Nabadoon Axmed Diriye: Gobolka Banadiir Hawiye ayaa leh inta kalena marti ayay ku tahay*” [Listen: Peace-maker Axmed Diriye: ‘Banaadir region belongs to the Hawiye, others are guests (here)’] 30 March 2016. Accessed 28 June 2016.
<http://goobjooge.com/axmed-diiriye-gobolka-banaadir-hawiye-ayaa-leh/>
- ¹⁷ Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland*.
- ¹⁸ Walls et al. “International Election Observation Mission.”
- ¹⁹ Renders, *Consider Somaliland*; Hoehne, “Mimesis and Mimicry.”
- ²⁰ Barnes, “The Somali Youth League.”
- ²¹ Adam, *Gather Round the Speakers*.
- ²² Stremlau, “Hostages of Peace.”
- ²³ Email correspondence with current editor of Muqdisho newspaper, February 2015.
- ²⁴ Hoehne, “Newspapers in Hargeisa.”
- ²⁵ Interview with Mahamoud Abdi Jama, Head of Somaliland Journalists’ Association [SOLJA]. Hargeysa, 5 May 2015.
- ²⁶ Feldman, “Somalia: Amidst the Rubble”; Nurhussein “Global Networks”.
- ²⁷ Focus group, Garowe, Puntland State University, 7 March 2015.

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- ²⁸ Interviews with website owners in Somalia and in the diaspora. London, 27 May 2015, and Garoowe, 27 February 2015.
- ²⁹ Interview with Mahamoud Abdi Jama, Head of Somaliland Journalists' Association [SOLJA], Hargeysa, May 5, 2015. Not everyone, of course, is equally accepting of plagiarism, especially journalists with professional media experience outside of Somalia and who endeavour to produce what they see as higher quality content. (Interview with Somali-origin journalist working with international and regional media organisations, 13 May 2015).
- ³⁰ Interview with Abdifatah Askar, Director of PLTV, Garoowe, 3 March 2015.
- ³¹ Hansen, "Revolving Returnees"; Hammond "Diaspora Returnees to Somaliland."
- ³² *Himilo* newspaper, Hargeysa, 25 April 2015, "*Qaxootiga Yurub oo lagu sifeeyey cayayaan liita*" [Refugees described as bad as insects in Europe].
- ³³ Abdi, *Elusive Jannah*.
- ³⁴ Meeting attended between Somaliland Journalists' Association representatives and 10 female radio/TV journalists, Hargeysa, 7 May 2015.
- ³⁵ Stremlau et al. "The Political Economy of the Media."
- ³⁶ National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ), "Press Freedom at Risk in Somalia" NUSOJ Annual Report, 2014. http://www.ifex.org/somalia/2015/01/13/somalia_annualreport_2014.pdf;
- ³⁷ Somalia Media Law, Article 25.2. See also Human Rights Watch, 'Like fish in poisonous waters', 2016. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/05/02/fish-poisonous-waters/attacks-media-freedom-somalia>
- ³⁸ VOA Somali, 19 May 2015, "*Puntland oo dib u Fasaxday TV-ga Dawladda Somalia*" [Puntland gives permission again for Somali Government TV to operate].
<http://www.voasomali.com/content/article/2777271.html>
- ³⁹ Stremlau, "Hostages of Peace."
- ⁴⁰ BBC Somali Service Facebook photo/link post, 1 March 2015. Accessed 4 January 2017.
<https://www.facebook.com/bbcSomali/photos/a.388773159474.173374.367167334474/10152877126394475/?type=1&theater>
- ⁴¹ BBC Somali Service Facebook photo/link post, 1 March 2015. Accessed 4 January 2017.
<https://www.facebook.com/bbcSomali/photos/a.388773159474.173374.367167334474/10152825670464475/?type=1>
- ⁴² At the time of writing, Somaliland authorities had blocked access to social media sites for the holding and immediate aftermath of the November 2017 Presidential election.
- ⁴³ BBC "Debating Mogadishu Pictures" Live Response, 27 August 2015. Accessed 4 January 2017.
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/world-africa-34012096?ns_mchannel=social&ns_source=twitter&ns_campaign=bbc_live&ns_linkname=\[Debating%20Mogadishu%20pictures%2616:10\]&ns_fee=0#post_34076461](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/world-africa-34012096?ns_mchannel=social&ns_source=twitter&ns_campaign=bbc_live&ns_linkname=[Debating%20Mogadishu%20pictures%2616:10]&ns_fee=0#post_34076461)

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- ⁴⁴ Safia Aidid, “Can the Somali Speak? #Cadaanstudies”, 30 March 2015. Accessed 4 January 2017. <http://africasacountry.com/2015/03/can-the-somali-speak-cadaanstudies/>
- ⁴⁵ BBC, “#BBCTrending: The Somali woman who's become a global star on Instagram,” February 17, 2015. Accessed 28 June 2016. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-31462954>
- ⁴⁶ Caasimada Online, “Arag sawiro laga soo qaaday taankiyo & gawaari casri ah oo saaran markabkii lagu qabtay dekedda Berbera dhowaan” [See pictures taken of tanks and modern vehicles from ship held recently in Berbera port], 1 February 2015. <http://caasimadda.com/arag-sawiro-laga-soo-qaaday-qaar-kamid-ah-gaadiidkii-dagaal-ee-ku-rarnaa-markabka-berbera-kusoo-xirtay/>; See John Webster’s replica tanks website for the source of the copied pictures. Accessed 4 January 2017. <http://www.milweb.net/webverts/59550/>
- ⁴⁷ Horseed Media, “Somaliland oo hubkii Saarnaa Markabkii Berbera ku xirnaa la soo degtey!” [Somaliland offloads weapons from ship impounded in Berbera], 2 February 2015. Accessed 4 January 2017. <https://horseedmedia.net/2015/02/02/somaliland-oo-hubkii-ka-dejisay-markabkii-hubka-sidey-ee-ku-xirtay-berbera/>
- ⁴⁸ Xog-doon newspaper, Muqdisho, “Puntland oo ku eedeysay Somaliland inay taageerto xoogaga Al-Shabaab ee Galgala” [Puntland accuses Somaliland of supporting Al Shabaab in Galgala], 31 January 2014.
- ⁴⁹ Hoehne, “Resource Conflict and Militant Islamism”.
- ⁵⁰ Osman, *Media, Diaspora*; Lindley, “Transnational Connections and Education”; Ahmed, “Remittances and Their Economic Impact”.

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