Eritrea Symposium 2021

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Panel 2: Struggling for Justice and Democracy in the Age of Falsehood and Unreality

New Media, Digital Diaspora, and Political Activism

What does the new media look like?

Like many things in the world, media had evolved accommodating technology driven rapid changes in communication. And unlike old media new media, apart from being in digital format, it is more interactive, offering more freedom of choice to navigate and select information sources. Vast and 24/7 information flow, freedom to choose and interact though new media tools , Facebook, tweeter, YouTube.

Major notable feature of new media includes its contribution to mobilize and facilitate cultural globalization, contributing to collective intelligence and group thinking through virtual networks. And with virtual network, we start experiencing a unique reality, completely different than the face-to-face reality – a fast moving reality inundated with information on issues, people and events. New Media presents a very different reality from face to face to 'lived reality' **(Source: Martin Lister et al – New Media: A critical Introduction)**

New Media Perspectives:

Despite its merits and contribution to economic, political and social growth, new media tools had been characterized by many skeptics as bad connection, fake news, increase in surveillance... etc.

The Neophiliacs and Cultural Pessimists Perspective

Neophiliac perspective (Cultural Optimists) **–** argue that new media is beneficial to society and individuals and it provided new ways for people to interact with each other, and ultimately

resulted in more people challenging the powerful and economic growth, providing also platforms for social movement and political activism. What new media had made possible also is construct online identity and a venue for global connection erasing any local boundaries.

On the other hand, Cultural Pessimists – argue pitfalls of new media, focusing on its negative influence on society. Few of the drawbacks include the rise of eco-chambers leading to polarization of opinion and bubbles within the bubble itself. Risk of people descending into online social cliques that don't speak outside their community. Moreover one has to deal with overloaded information – a major challenge verifying fact from fake news and misinformation

Eritrean Digital Diaspora Political Activism in the Age of New Media – failure to launch?

Though political activism is about individuals and groups taking action on behalf of others to bring change in a society, usually what motivate us to be activists is driven from personality and life experience. New media and particularly social media tools such as tweeter, Facebook, and the likes more than ever created opportunity hooking likeminded individuals and groups to communicate faster to a large audience on issues of interest.

Isolated and marginalized

Eritrean political activism within Eritrean diaspora is usually geared towards the quest of justice, democracy, reform and bringing change. Most notable, the meaningful mobilization and movement of the diaspora made possible Eritrea's independence in 1991. Similarly in 1998 the border war with Ethiopia, once again brought Eritrean communities across the world together for a common cause to defend the homeland and assist in humanitarian aid. These and many successful activism tasks were accomplished through thoroughly planned and organized reach out via unions within the diaspora communities (Unions for workers, students, women).

In contrast, digital diaspora most notable from the 90s onward, has seen few and far in between political activism that match the outreach, mobilization, and impact of traditional Eritrean diaspora. This is even though Eritrean diaspora are highly engaged in the new media and connected than ever before. In the late 90s and early 2000s presence of Eritrean diaspora was very limited. sites (Asmarino.com , Awate.com, dehai news, meskerem…. Etc) created by

Eritreans and dedicated to Eritreans interconnection served as a hub for information and interconnection.

Undeniably, Eritrean digital diaspora in the age of new media, are globally connected and bound together through the internet, participating in new media platform and overwhelmingly in social media. While advocating for justice, democracy and call for change in Eritrea, they still trying to relive and recover the past. Nevertheless generally, the Eritrean digital diasporas live in a virtual reality of the homeland, Eritrea. And whether physical or imaginary homeland, and despite new media being a tool for maintaining a sense of community belong both within and beyond the national boundaries, there is a sense of too many but not enough.

At present, at its core, Eritrean digital diaspora is marginalized and polarized. Unfortunately, the entire Eritrean population faces never ending barriers and is systematically excluded from decisions and policies that affect their lives and the affairs of the nation. Absence of free press, indefinite national service, limits on civil liberties, detention of dissidents and absence of due process are the result of unaccounted, capricious regime run by the few.

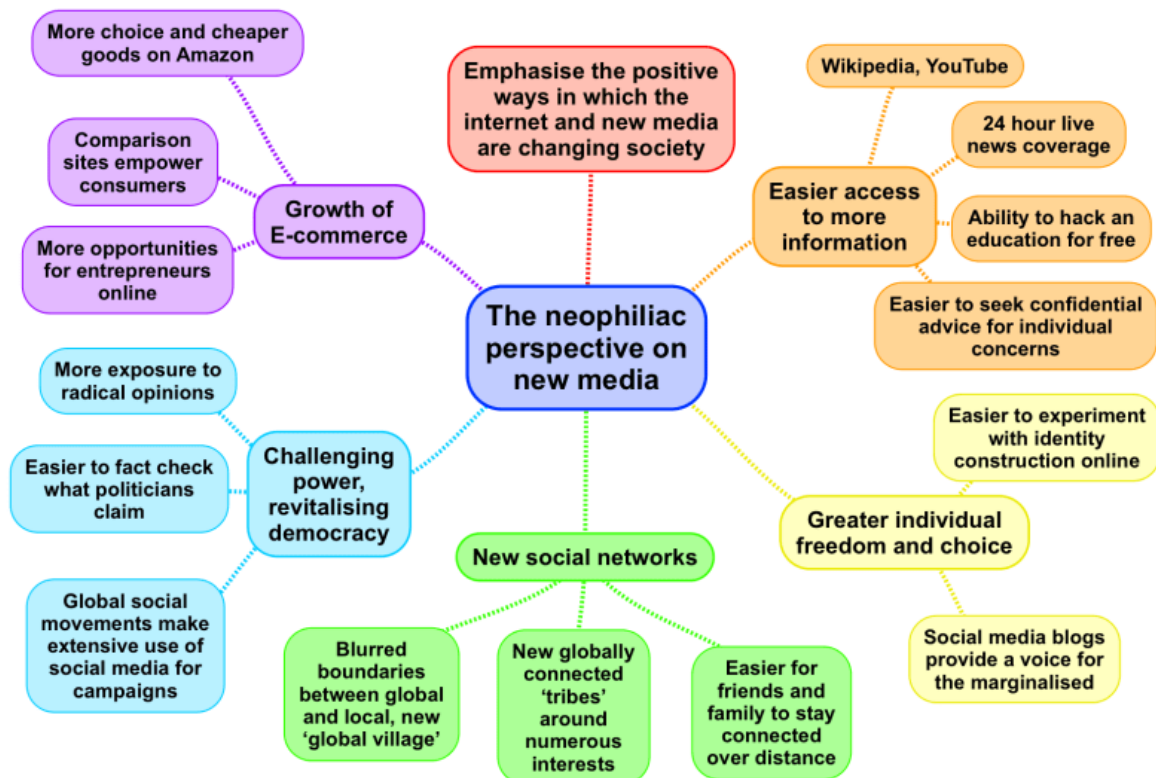Challenges of Marginalized and Polarized Eritrean Digital Diaspora Activists

- Bubble within the bubble.

- erosion of history threat to national identity.

- Fact vs fiction.

- The people with mega microphones running the show in social media.

In conclusion, after assessing the Eritrean digital diaspora and political activism is it impartial to argue and write off new media and settle for the cultural pessimist approach? or do Eritrean diaspora need to embrace systematic approach to move forward? These are the stark reality, one have to face as individual activists or group activists. On the bright side, the complex nature of new media and its challenge is also felt by political activism in in the United State, "whereas

nearly 70 percent of civil resistance campaigns succeeded during the 1990s, only 30 percent have succeeded since 2010" [Chenoweth, ForeignPolicy.com 2016].

Possible Solutions to look at

- Team work across groups.

- design and develop an Eritrean media network.

- Use specific platform and build presence.

- Identify resources and grassroots.

Source: Revise Sociology – The Neophiliac Perspective On New Media (September 13, 2019)

https://revisesociology.com