Muted Online Voices: The Role of the Internet in Amplifying Freedom of Expression of Persons with Disabilities in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Little is known about the role of the Internet in facilitating the rights of persons with disabilities to express themselves in Ethiopia. The objective of this article is thus to provide insights into the role of the Internet in amplifying the opinion and action of persons with disabilities by scrutinizing Internet accessibility and digital inclusion to exercise their freedom of expression where inclusive policy-making could be a challenge. The article acknowledges access to the Internet in Ethiopia is minimal and the digital divide for persons with disabilities is visible, potentially excluding them from accessing official information, expressing their interests, and fighting against stereotypes they face. This article refers to data from the literature, unstructured interviews with purposively identified persons with disabilities, and an overview of the online engagement of people with disabilities and their associations. It also draws information from a research validation conference in which participants voiced the challenges and prospects for freedom of expression and information of persons with disabilities. The paper argues that the Internet can serve as an effective communication sphere and mode of expression to facilitate meaningful participation of people with disabilities in Ethiopia. The paper further suggests the proposed draft Access to Information proclamation to the Council of Ministers in mid-2021 and Digital Ethiopia Strategy 2025 must recognize the importance of digital technologies to respond to the information and expression needs of people with disabilities.

Keywords: *Freedom of Expression, People with Disabilities, Internet, Digital Divide, Digital Inclusion*

Introduction

With the advent of civil rights protection of persons with disabilities and changes in public policy, the definition of disability moved away from medical to social emphasizing on people being disabled by society rather than by their bodies. Following this definition, disability is a dynamic

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interaction between the medical conditions of an individual and other contextual factors, i.e., physical, social, cultural and legislative. Another approach to disability is in relation to rights. People with disabilities can be recognized as marginalized social groups whose communication needs and rights are dominated by the larger group in the society (Fertsch and Simcox 2016). Combining the two approaches, the social conditions concept emphasizes the stereotypical representation and underrepresentation of persons with disabilities in the media as a major challenge for hindering them from enjoying equal treatment and the right to communication (Fertsch and Simcox 2016; Francise and Silvers 2016).

Underrepresentation in the media, among other social factors, is as a result of the modes of communication used by people with disabilities, which is not the mainstream language in a society, i.e., sign language and Braille (McLeod 2018). This can best be explained through the 'Muted Group Theory', developed by Shirley and Edwin Ardener to explain language as a "*dominant mode of expression*" in societies where there is a "*dominant structure within it*" (Wall and Gannon-Leary 1999:22). The Muted Group Theory notes that individuals must use the dominant mode of expression to communicate with the larger society to gain voice. The concept of 'muted' in this theory, emphasizes on the inability to express one's opinion regardless of time, place and modes of expression (Wall and Gannon-Leary 1999).

Adopting the Muted Group Theory, this article considers people with all types of disabilities as a muted group. Bearing in mind that communication is a fundamental characteristic of humanity, this article attempts to discuss the role of the Internet in protecting the rights of people with all types of disabilities to receive, produce, store and share information (Waltz and Schippers 2020; McLeod 2018; Madans et al. 2011). The Internet potentially amplifies freedom of expression of people with disabilities by creating a real-time communication platform and digital language to be shared with the dominant group. The arrival of digital communication tools and software have contributed to promote the rights of people with disabilities to access information and express themselves efficiently and effectively.

Nevertheless, there is a digital divide observed on patterns of usage and skills of basic access to digital communication technologies, Internet connectivity and other communication devices (Vincent and Lopez 2010). There are challenges in the prospects of the Internet and emerging digital technologies in promoting disability inclusion and the exercise of freedom of expression. The Internet pushed people with disabilities into the "*second-class citizens of the information society*" (McLeod 2018; Scholz et al. 2017; Lazar and Jaeger 2011; Castells 2009). The primary reason for excluding people with disabilities from enjoying the opportunities digital technology provides is the nature of the Internet and its accessibility defined by socio-demographic and technological factors (Scholz et al.

2017; Lazar and Jaeger 2011). Most Internet-based technologies are created inaccessible by persons with differing disabilities (Lazar and Jaeger 2011). For instance, many websites are inaccessible to persons with visual impairment as they lack software applications with speech-output screen readers, while people with hearing impairment are restricted to participate in virtual meetings when it lacks captioning (Lazar and Jaeger 2011). Regardless of the limitations observed in the technological design of the Internet, equal access to the available digital communication platform should be seen as a fundamental component to protect the rights of persons with disabilities to access, produce, store and disseminate information.

This article therefore examines the rights of online freedom of expression for persons with disabilities in Ethiopia whose rights have been thwarted by societal perceptions, lack of access to communication technologies and gaps in laws and policies (Abebe 2019; McLeod 2018). The study argues that digital communication technologies, including the Internet, can provide a sphere of inclusion for persons with disabilities if a conducive legal and policy environment is created, aspiring to build a digital economy. This study utilized unstructured interviews with purposively selected individuals with physical, visual and hearing impairments to understand their experience of using the Internet. The informants were identified based on their active role in promoting the rights of people with disabilities on the Internet. The unstructured interview helped establish rapport with interviewees and obtain information about their personal experiences that inform the analysis in this study.

The article aims to understand the role of the Internet in facilitating freedom of expression and access to information by analyzing existing works of literature and a quick overview of online engagement of people with disabilities. Facebook pages of four disability associations[35] were selected for review to support the argument the Internet can serve people with disabilities as a platform to exercise their freedom of expression. Online user-generated data, comments and shares on any issue of interest to people with disabilities were collected from Facebook and Twitter. These platforms are primarily used in Ethiopia[36] and have features that help to share website and YouTube links in an interrelated manner. Reflections from persons with disabilities and researchers were gathered from a workshop on the inclusion of blind and deaf students in Addis Ababa University. [37] Extracted individual social media posts and

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[35] These are Ethiopian National Association of the Blind, Ethiopian National Association of Persons with Physical Disabilities, Federation of Ethiopian Association with Disabilities, and Ethiopian National Association of The Deaf.

[36] Currently, about 6% of Ethiopians use Facebook (Facebook users in Ethiopia - January 2021 | NapoleonCat)

[37] Research validation conference focused on the inclusion of deaf and blind students at Addis Ababa University, organized on July 28, 2021 by the Center for Human Rights.

comments used in this study were edited to protect the identity of speakers.

The Digital Divide in Ethiopia

Accessing credible and up-to-date data about disabilities in Ethiopia is challenging and at times absent. The national census and statistics are outdated, and other national surveys do not include information on disabilty in general and on access and availability of the Internet and related digital communication devices for people with disabilities in particular.[38] Recent data from Central Statistics Authority estimated that about 8 million people in Ethiopia live with some form of disability, among which around 2.2 million people have severe disabilities (CSA 2018). The 2011 World Report on Disabilities puts the number of persons with disabilities in Ethiopia at 15 million,[39] 17.6% of the entire population, which makes it the largest minority group in the country (World Bank and WHO 2011).

Based on data obtained on January 2021, 23.5 million Ethiopians use the Internet.[40] Smartphone ownership rate in Ethiopia is also low; only 4% of the population (Freedom House 2020). Among these are persons with disabilities, who use the Internet and other technological gadgets. However, there are no specific data available about the level of use and challenges they face to enjoy the rights and privileges of using the digital technology (Kumar, Tiwari and Zymbler 2019; World Report on Disability 2011). There is also a digital divide that creates information and knowledge inequalities. Unlike others, there are complex barriers for persons with disabilities to access the Internet and other supporting gadgets such as smartphones.[41] In many developing countries, including Ethiopia, people with disabilities may be unable to have essential products such as mobile phones and Internet connectivity largely due to economic reasons and, to some extent, because of cultural and social factors that create the digital divide between societies (World Report on Disability 2011). The digital divide intensifies for persons with disabilities when countries put in place policies on Internet accessibility, but do not ensure its implementations (Ibid).

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[38] Ethiopia conducted the third and last population and housing census in 2007. The census report does not contain data about access to the Internet. Other national survey reports do not include data about the digital divide between persons with disabilities and the broader population in particular (statsethiopia.gov.et).

[39] Acknowledging that the number of people with disabilities may have increased throughout the last decade, this article chose to establish its analysis on the World Report on Disabilities' data.

[40] https://www.ethiotelecom.et/ethio-telecom-2013-efy-2020-21-first-half-business-performance-summary-report.

[41] Interview with Y.A. on April 26, 2021. Her initials are coined as she prefers to stay anonymous in this research.

Persons with disabilities in Ethiopia lack access to information in formats that are suitable to their needs. According to an informant from the Ethiopian National Association of Persons with Physical Disability, it is often the needs of people with impaired hearing, that has been given some degree of recognition by the government, which encouraged few media organizations to add sign language in newscasting (International Media Support 2020). However, even when there are efforts to provide sign language services, it lacks continuity and visible screen positioning to its viewership (Ibid). Informants with visual impairments pointed out that television programs are becoming heavily video reliant, forgetting that blind people are also part of their audience and need narration. Such shortcomings of the traditional media continue to be reflected on the Internet and other digital communication gadgets (Scholz et al. 2017; Lazar and Jaeger 2011).

Furthermore, there are challenges in physically accessing infrastructures that provide such services. The personal experience of Y.A. reflects the appropriation of the needs of people with disabilities to access the Internet. Y.A. remembered when she used to go to a building that does not comply with accessibility requirements for the physically disabled to use wheelchairs and crunches simply to check on her email. Y.A. highlighted that although the Internet seems accessible and affordable for her, it was not convenient due to her physical disability that made her decide to run a small Internet café. According to Y.A., the Internet café opens up opportunities for her such as online shopping, communicating with her friends and extending her congratulatory messages and condolences via social media. Further, many of her clients are people who are visually impaired and physically challenged. Y.A's Internet café is friendly for people who use wheelchairs, but lacks to provide a comprehensive service to others with different disabilities. The café does not have computers with screen reader software that translates screen contents into synthetic speech. Availing adaptive hardware device that allows Braille characters to be generated is also high-priced. However, the café is becoming a place for people with disabilities to exchange information about how to use the computer, access the Internet and web-enabled devices, and share free mobile applications.

The Ethiopian National Association of the Blind has also resumed its free broadband and Wi-Fi Internet service recently. [42] Efforts to provide visually impaired Ethiopians with digital literacy and access to the Internet started in June 2000 when the Adaptive Technology Center for the Blind (ATCB) was established. Since 2003, the Centre has trained 20 to 30 visually impaired persons with basic computer skills through the support of the International Telecommunication Union and UNESCO and ran an Internet Café in Addis Ababa. With such services, majority of young people with visual impairments are enthusiastic about digital

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[42]Social media post by the Ethiopian National Association of the Blind. March 17, 2021. www.facebook.com/1268113696676816/posts/1914291348725711/.

technologies. According to an unpublished reflection paper by Kassahun Yibeltal, the emergence and fast prevalence of digital communication technologies made Braille irrelevant to the current needs of people with visual impairments in Ethiopia.

The effort of individuals and disability associations to ensure Internet accessibility supports the argument that the Internet is perceived as a more accessible alternative that serves people with all types of disabilities as a source of information and a platform to express their opinions and interests. The Internet provides people with disabilities a tool to express themselves and develop friendships with others (Chadwick et al. 2013; Pilling, Barrett and Floyd 2004). Therefore, access to the Internet can no longer be considered as a luxury rather a 'survival tool' that can make life more enjoyable and all-inclusive as it empowers members of all segments of society (Pilling et al. 2004).

Providing access to the Internet in Ethiopia, however, seems to be considered secondary concerning people with disabilities. As elucidated by a visually impaired participant,[43] availing access to the Internet for people with disabilities requires a political will such as promoting digital inclusion as public policy from the Ethiopian government. Like other Internet-based businesses, the ATCB project faced regulatory challenges related to telecommunication regulation, political restriction on the exercise of freedom of expression, and the anti-terrorism proclamation that discouraged the use of technology to access information and express one's opinion (World Connected 2021). Lack of digital literacy and Internet access also remains a major challenge for people with disabilities, forcing inclusion activists to depend on traditional modes of communication to provide service and access to information.

Fiyori Tewolde is a trained journalist who introduced Ethiopia's first-ever Braille newspaper, "Fetel", in September 2020 for people who are deaf-blind and with visual impairments. The newspaper publishes news and job vacancies to keep the visually impaired informed about current affairs and help expand their access to equal employment opportunities in society. According to Fiyori, most visually impaired people prefer Braille print due to inadequate training on assistive computer technologies and limited access to the Internet in the country. For Fiyori, lack of access to media content by people with visual impairment made her consider producing the Braille newspaper and her desire to voice the needs and concerns of people who are deaf-blind. Reading about Fiyori's initiative, an anonymous philanthropist developed a website for Fetel.[44] The website incorporated contents that are accessibile to the visually impaired with audio that provides access to the textual version of the newspaper's content.

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[43] Reflection by female participant at a research validation conference focused on the inclusion of deaf and blind students at Addis Ababa University, July 28, 2021, Center for Human Rights.
[44] https://fetel.org

Content and medium availability on its own could not be a sufficient condition to respond to the rights of people with disabilities to express themselves. Emerging technologies, such as the Internet of Things and Artificial Intelligence, can enhance accessibility (Kumar et al. 2019). In a country like Ethiopia, where technology incubators are fast-growing, practical advocacy work is expected from disability inclusion advocates and associations to ensure that tech startups and government-supported digital technology programs add appropriate markup, i.e., descriptive text for graphics, forms and links. It should also be noted that digital inclusion does not involve advanced coding and additional expertise, rather an awareness and willingness to consider providing equal access to the Internet.

Eliminating Stereotypes in Practice: Enhancing the Online Voices of Persons with Disabilities
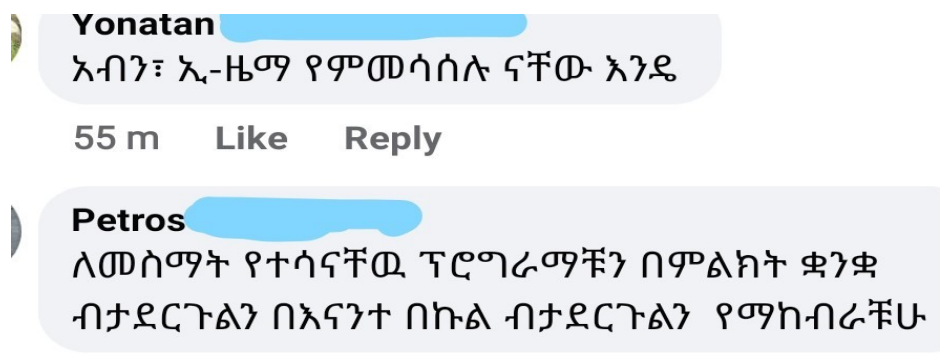
The nature of societal prejudice against people with disabilities in Ethiopia is similar, while the nature of discrimination varies between different types of disabilities (Tewodros 2019). Often disability is associated with physical disabilities such as visual impairment, hearing impairment, and physical disability, while individuals' cognitive and psychiatric functional losses are repeatedly neglected from policy debates, reinforced by societal stereotypes and media reporting (Barnes 1988).

Societal stereotyping hinders people with disabilities from participating in public life (Tewodros 2019; Tirusew 2005). Social attitudes and stereotypes often come into play in creating an environment where the opinions of people with disabilities are not welcome, and their ideas are accepted as worthy of consideration on an equal basis with nondisabled people (Tewodros 2019; Dagnachew 2011; Tirusew 2005). Persons with disabilities are stereotypically represented in the communities and the media as weak and lacking their own opinion.

The primary role of the media is therefore to raise awareness, countering stigma and misinformation about persons with disabilities. Nevertheless, the Ethiopian media, online and offline, lack to be inclusive of persons with disabilities in the content making, allotting airtime, and hiring them in the media workforce (International Media Support 2020). This situation attests to how social conditions contribute to discrimination and underrepresentation of persons with disabilities in the media (Fertsch and Simcox 2016; Francise and Silvers 2016). Negative stereotyping is also practiced by government officials who supposedly are expected to promote and protect the rights of persons with disabilities. In a recently televised political debate, a representative of the ruling party said that "*turning the blind eye on the changes that have been taking place ever since the*

government change is denial; even those who are blind can tell the change".[45] Such demeaning assertions negatively impacts the political participation and freedom of expression of people with disabilities. Leaders of opposition parties running for the 2021 national elections have reflected on their inclusive policies of disability. Some of them avowed to have strategies to including persons with disabilities in their party structure and ensure equal participation of citizens without discrimination in social, political and economic matters when they assume power. [46] During the 2021 national election campaign, there were no people with disabilities who attended and featured as speakers at any major political party debates televised and posted online regardless of the attempt made by the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia that established the Ethiopian Center for Disability and Development Association to host political parties and candidates' media debates.[47]

Regardless, there is a growing demand from people with disabilities to engage in such debates as is shown in the following extract from Walta TV facebook page, a comment made regarding a televised debate between political parties.

Yonatan
አብን፣ ኢ-ዜማ የምመሳሰሉ ናቸው እንዴ

55 m   Like   Reply

Petros
ለመስማት የተሳናቸዉ ፕሮግራማቹን በምልክት ቋንቋ ብታደርጉልን በእናንተ በኩል ብታደርጉልን የማከብራቹሁ

The above screenshot translates: "*I would appreciate it if you could put an effort to translate your programs in sign languages.*"

The steady growth of Internet use among individuals influences public opinion and how citizens access political information, storage, retrieval, interpretation, and dissemination in Ethiopia. The technological change seems to involve persons with disabilities to utilize the online platform for political activism. People with disabilities who were asked to reflect their opinion for this piece have a positive attitude towards using the Internet to amplify their voices and spread messages. They find access to the Internet essential to interact with the general population and form online interest groups among like-minded individuals regardless of their

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[45] A statement made by the representative of Prosperity Party, Dr Seyum Mesfin, in Political Parties Debate on Wlata TV on April 14, 2021: 9:10pm

[46] A claim made by representatives from EPRP, Hibir Ethiopia, Ethiopians for Equality and Freedom, and Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (Ezema) in "Tenager Bekenfre Tekemet Bewenber", a radio show on Sheger FM 102.1 on April 22, 2021: 2:30-3:00pm

[47] Tameru Regasa. Ethiopia: "NEBE names Media Organizations to Election Debate". The Ethiopian Herald March 19, 2021.

different abilities. One of the informants mentioned that *"creating Facebook, Telegram and WhatsApp groups to share ideas and experiences are becoming 'the new tradition' among people with disabilities"*.

Nonetheless, cyberbullying and hate speech against people with disabilities are often observed, specifically when voicing their political opinions. Stereotypical representation of people with disabilities on the Internet as victim, hero and villain (Scholz et al. 2017; Chadwick et al. 2013). They are depicted as a helpless subject of misfortune and empathy or a hero character who proves to overcome challenges that resulted from their disability. It is also common to see people with disabilities represented as evil or depravity (Scholz et al. 2017). Key informants interviewed in this study were asked to identify people with disabilities that they know are active on Facebook in order to purposively target a subpopulation to understand how people with disabilities are portrayed online. A quick overview of purposively selected Facebook pages owned by people with disabilities in Ethiopia shows that people with disabilities are frequently portrayed as villains on the Internet, specifically when they amplify their political opinion in the context of contested political transition.

As Y.A. highlighted, the rise of *"irresponsible social media activism"* in recent times makes persons with disabilities shy away from expressing their opinions on the Internet. Irresponsible use of social media is an online activity that often results in violence, child pornography and social depravity against minority groups and people with disabilities. The screenshot below from the Facebook page of a well-known visually impaired political activist contains derogatory language that dehumanize disability in general.
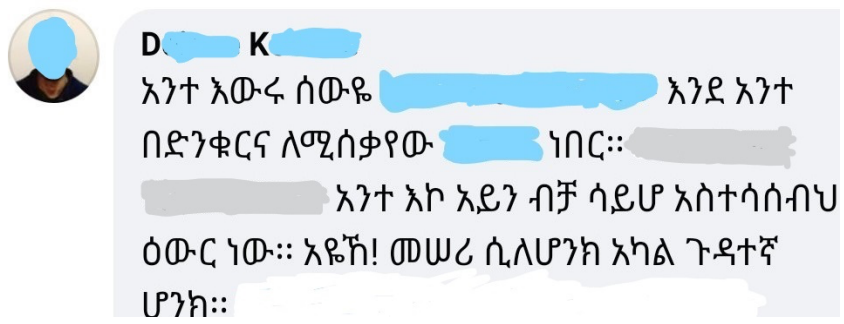
> The screenshot translates: "*you the blind, you are also suffering from ignorance… you lost not only your eye sights but insights. See! Because you are wicked, you are disabled*".

This clip demonstrates that the Internet may not necessarily provide a safe platform for people with disabilities to express their opinions, as

online hate speech[48] and negative portrayal of people with disabilities are becoming alarming. It is also an example that societal prejudice that depicts persons with disabilities as villains continues to be practiced on the Internet.

Conversely, a personal Facebook page run by a renowned disability inclusion and rights advocate, Yetnebersh Nigussie, has nearly three hundred ninety thousand followers. Yetnebersh is a visually impaired lawyer utilizing social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (with nearly three thousand followers) to advocate for the rights of people with disabilities. Among other issues, she promotes inclusive communication of public and private organizations to make their websites accessible to persons with disabilities. Biresaw who has a physical disability also actively engage on social media, known for advocating political and social issues using a nickname to avoid cyberbullying. For Biresaw, the Internet is a means necessary to access information and interact with the world and voice his concerns:

> *I grew up in early 2000, at a time the Internet was not popular in Ethiopia. For me, the world has changed for the better when I start to use the Internet. I used to wait for some days to get a response from pen pals with whom I frequently share my opinions and feelings through letters… the Internet provides me with the opportunity to interact with others in real-time without leaving my wheelchair and to impart my opinion, be it on politics or social issues.*

Online activists such as Biresaw advocate for an inclusive policy environment for people with disabilities. However, online activism on disability inclusion and the fundamental rights of people with disabilities lacks consistency as the issue does not attract the broader rights activists' attention potentially mired by the existing social exclusion.[49] D is a disability rights activist and legal practitioner who feels online activism makes it possible to voice the concerns of his communities:

> *We have been demanding social inclusion and fighting stereotypical discrimination. As to me, I am tired of screaming for justice and cannot start a new campaign to advocate for freedom of expression when decision-makers are turning their backs to our demands for fair treatment.*[50]

According to D, the existing social prejudice against people with disabilities made it difficult to promote freedom of expression and

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[48] The Proclamation defined 'hate speech' as a speech that deliberately promotes hatred, discrimination and attack against persons or groups based on their identity, including disability.

[49] Interview with Biresaw B., April 24, 2021. Addis Ababa.

[50] Informal Discussion with a board member of one of the disability associations, who prefers to be called as D in this article, April 29, 2021. Addis Ababa.

access to the Internet. A quick overview of social media posts of selected disability associations in Ethiopia shows limited efforts to promote and protect the freedom of expression and opinion of people with disabilities online and offline. There are posts about access to information and adaptive technologies to promote the right to education for people with hearing and visual impairments. Nonetheless, freedom of expression and access to digital communication technologies seems to be neglected by disability associations as part of their online activism. Looking into the social media pages of disability associations in Ethiopia, one can observe the change in the scope of their activism since the 2018 political transformation from demanding social action to political participation of persons with all types of disabilities.[51] Policy alternatives to ensure disability inclusion in relation to the 2021 elections were also discussed online.[52]

Disability and Freedom of Expression Online: Laws and Policies in Ethiopia

The universal human rights and the enactment of the international bills of rights hold governments responsible for ensuring equal enjoyment of all human rights by all, including people with disabilities. Ethiopia has ratified and adopted international human rights instruments and incorporated them as part and parcel of its Constitution.[53] This includes the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

The CRPD guarantees the right to freedom of expression to all people and demands states to ensure that people with all types of disabilities fully enjoy their human rights, including freedom of expression. The CRPD is a comprehensive, legally binding international document hailed for reflecting liberal and humanist ideals enshrined in the Universal Declarations of Human Rights and is the first human rights convention to be open for signature by regional integration organizations. [54] Considering the challenges of people with disabilities to make their voice heard in conventional communication mediums, the CRPD examines specific issues impacting the ability of persons with disabilities to enjoy the freedom of expression on an equal basis with others. The CRPD places great emphasis on the need for information to be available in accessible

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[51] www.facebook.com/1268113696676816/posts/1928653557289490/
[52] www.facebook.com/491583560931081/posts/4127345967354804/
[53] FDRE Article 13(2)
[54] UN General Assembly, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly*, 24 January 2007, A/RES/61/106. Use UNTS format to cite international treaties

formats and technologies, whether distributed by the mass media or by public or private actors (CRPD 2007: Article 21). The media, including the Internet, are also responsible for providing information relevant to people with disabilities in a manner that is also easily accessible to them as enshrined in the CRPD (CRPD 2007: 9 1b and 2g).

Moreover, the General Comment on the CRPD emphasizes that access to information and communication is emphasized as a foundation for freedom of expression.[55] Under Article 21, the CPRD calls for States to accept sign language, Braille, and other means and modes of communication that persons with disabilities choose to use whenever they have "*official interactions*". It further stipulates the media to portray people with disabilities in a manner consistent with respect for human rights and raise awareness to combat stereotypes about persons with disabilities (CRPD 2007: Article 8). Although the CRPD is criticized for not addressing the parameters of freedom of expression and opinion in the same detail as the ICCPR, it enacts the Internet as an effective communication platform that promotes the rights of people with disabilities (McLeod 2018). Article 19 of the ICCPR protected freedom of expression. The ICCPR can also be applied to the Internet, as it was drafted with the prudence to accommodate future technological advancements that help individuals enjoy their freedom of expression.[56]

It shall be recalled that the UN Human Rights Council adopted a landmark resolution in 2012 affirming "*the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online*" (OHCHR 2012: para 1). The Internet is being explained as one means to further human rights in the digital age and is considered as a derivative right.[57] The former UN Special Rapporteur Frank La Rue explained that States have a positive obligation to promote and protect the means necessary to enjoy the freedom of expression and that such means include creating a conducive environment to access the Internet by all people. Article 19(2) of the ICCPR indicates that, regardless of ability, using the Internet as a means to send and receive information is protected (Mulcair et al. 2018). The ICCPR recognizes freedom of expression and information broadly, including academic freedom, artistic freedom and political speech. It also protects 'all kinds of' information regardless of their perceived value and impact (ICCPR 1993: Article 19(2)). The ICCPR, which Ethiopia ratified on 11 June 1993, imposes obligations on State parties to respect its provisions and permits no restrictions whatsoever on the "*right to hold opinions without interference*" (ICCPR 1993: Article 19(1)). It does, however, allow restrictions on freedom of expression and information. But such

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[55] Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Eleventh session 31 March–11 April 2014. General Comment No. 2 (2014) on CRPD Article 9: Accessibility. Paragraph 1, 21, 31
[56] Frank La Rue, Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, August 2011 La Rue Report, supra note 8.
[57]   http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/technology/2011/06/united-nations-reportinternet-access-is-a-human-right.html

restrictions are permissible on specific conditions and for limited purposes such as for the respect of the rigths or reputation of others and for the protection of national security and public order (Ibid: Artcile 19 (3a and 3b).

The Ethiopian Constitution grants freedom of expression in accordance with the international human rights instruments. Article 29 of the Constitution is applicable to the use of any media assisted with new technologies, including the Internet in the exercise of freedom of expression (Yohannes 2020; Gedion 2010). The Constitution (Article 41(5)) stipulates the government's responsibility to ensure necessary support and services for persons with disabilities, while the proclamation concerning the rights to employment for persons with disabilities declares to eliminate discriminatory situations that hinder equal employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.[58] Therefore, the central point is the recognition of the right to technology rather than online content moderation to prohibit hate and discriminatory speeches against people with disabilities on the Internet.

Ethiopia seems to be keen to advance digital technology to provide online access to all through laws and policies and encourage digital entrepreneurship. Recently, Ethiopia ratified the Marrakesh Treaty in February 2020.[59] The Marrakesh Treaty is an international convention that helps people with visual impairments access published works in formats such as braille and audio. The treaty stipulates that harmful stereotype against persons with visual impairments limit their freedom of expression on an equal basis with others, and this must be combated by promoting all forms of communication of their choice. The ratification of the Marrakesh Treaty protects the rights of the visually impaired to obtain information in an accessible format. The government has enacted and implemented policies that acknowledge the rights of people with disabilities. Among the new legal developments is the enactment of the Media Proclamation, which broadens the means of broadcasting service by recognizing Internet-based information dissemination with the aim to promote information diversity and inclusion of people with disabilities.[60] The Proclamation requires any media to "*broadcast programs with content specially adapted for persons with disabilities*" unless it is licensed to report on a specific issue (Ibid: Article 55(n)). The law further prohibits inciting contents that promote hate on the grounds of age, mental or physical disability (Ibid: Article 68(e)).

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[58] Proclamation concerning the Rights to Employment for Persons with Disabilities, No. 568/2008
[59] The Marrakesh Treaty was adopted in 2013 by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)
[60] Proclamation No. 1238/2021. Page 13122 (35).

Other laws also protect the equal rights of persons with disabilities and prohibit discrimination against their conditions. [61] When it comes to policies, the National Plan of Action of Persons with Disabilities (2012-2021) promised to make Ethiopia an inclusive society by addressing the needs for full participation of persons with disabilities. The 10-year perspective plan of economic and social development, which is called Pathway to Prosperity (2021-2030), replaced the previous Growth and Development Plan II and prioritizes inclusive social and economic development in which technology plays a role to create a digital economy. [62] The Council of Ministers has also approved the Digital Ethiopia Strategy 2025 that is thought to support the country's objective to ensure "*more efficient and inclusive interactions between citizens, government and businesses, thereby catalyzing its progress towards its national priorities*".[63] The issue of people with disabilities is mentioned only when the strategy document discusses attracting Impact Sourcing Service Providers (ISSPs) that are targeting workers from underprivileged communities through their non-profit or semi-profit social business approach. However, the short term projects of the Digital Ethiopia Strategy 2025 aims to ensure accessibility and affordability of digital infrastructures for all guided by the notion of the "*legal identity for all*" to accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Agenda 2063.

Such policy frameworks put forward by the government of Ethiopia, as part of its general obligations, to support the realization of the rights of persons with disabilities can ensure Internet access by all if supported with relevant directives (CRPD 2007: Article 4 (1-5)). Such policy measures can unmute the voice of people with disabilities within the society and on the Internet. General Comment No. 2 on the CRPD encourages private entities that provides service to the general public, both online and offline, to provide accessible information, services and media content to people with disabilities.[64]

The importance of the Internet in Ethiopia however goes beyond providing information and enabling freedom of expression. The Internet has created a loophole for the State, individuals, non-state actors, and

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[61] The Federal Civil Servant Proclamation No. 515/2007; Labor Proclamation, No. 377/2003, amended by Labor Proclamation No. 494/2006; Proclamation on Definition of Powers of Duties of the Executive Organs of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, No. 691/2010; Building Proclamation, No. 624/2009; Proclamation No. 676/2010 on the Ratification of the "UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" (UN CRPD) by Ethiopia.

[62] Development Assistance Group Ethiopia. Phase V- Development Partners Support to the Implementation of GTP II and SDGs. Second Quarter Report (April-June 2020.)

[63] Digital Ethiopia - capital Newspaper (capitalethiopia.com)

[64] Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Eleventh session 31 March–11 April 2014. General Comment No. 2 (2014) on CRPD Article 9: Accessibility. Paragraphs 14, 21, and 48.

intermediaries,[65] to interfere with people's access to the Internet to attain freedom of expression and information in this digital world (Hick et al. 2000).

Privacy is a common challenge to people with and without disabilities when using the Internet (Scholz et al. 2017; Vincent and Lopez 2010). In Ethiopia, persons with disabilities often do not live independently due to preemptive societal structure and cultural barriers where caregivers and others living with them may not sufficiently respect their privacy. Habtamu Addise lost his hands due to a bomb blast when he was a child.[66] He taught himself to use his legs to perform daily tasks except for typing on a computer keyboard and smartphones:

> *I know our experience with the Internet varies by type of disability. For me, using smartphones or any computer keyboard to join social media is unthinkable because my hands are amputated. I can use my legs to eat, wear my closes, write, and do carpentry. But, if I want to post on Facebook, I must seek support from friends and family to type it down for me, which makes me feel restrained from saying whatever is in my mind.*

Today, people with limited use of their hands like Habtamu benefit from assistive technologies to use computers and smartphones. There are speech generating and voice recognition devices that can help people with physical disabilities who cannot use computers and touch screens to command data and the computer system. Ethiopia is recognized among the few African countries that utilize the Artificial Intelligence (AI) solutions at scale (Abebe 2019; Kumar et al. 2019). Following the growing interest and growth in the AI market, the Ethiopian government established Artificial Intelligence Center with a mission to "*fostering the development of a nationally recognized AI ecosystem to empower and inspire a nation for peace and prosperity with the most trusted analytics*".[67] The country thus needs to consider the importance of enhancing access to the Internet, broadband connectivity and cloud computing to support the flourishing AI market in the country (Abebe 2019; Kumar et al. 2019).

AI initiatives ought to respond to the development of assistive devices and software applications that can support persons with disabilities to interact with their surroundings. The invention of the humanoid robot 'Sofia', to which an Ethiopian AI-focused company[68] was involved in developing its software parts, is the best example to argue that an inclusive technological advancement and effective AI intervention to

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[65] In Ethiopia's case, the State owned Ethio Telecom, and its outsourcing local private companies engaged in selling fixed-line Internet services can be considered as Internet intermediaries.

[66] Interview with Habtamu Addise. April 28, 2021. Addis Ababa.

[67] vision and Mission - AIC

[68] Feature: Robot Sophia inspires young Ethiopian AI enthusiasts - Xinhua | English.news.cn (xinhuanet.com)

improve the lives of people with disabilities is possible in Ethiopia (Abebe 2019). Even though AI helps build an inclusive and interactive society, it can also also affect individuals' privacy and data protection unless regulated under international human rights standards (Abebe 2019; Lazar and Jaeger 2011). For technology startups in Ethiopia to benefit the underprivileged, existing laws and policies should therefore be implemented to fully protect the rights and freedom of people with disabilities to participate in public life.[69]

Conclusion

This article showed that the society understands disability through a medical model approach that suggests integrating a person into the society's norms, rather than creating a conducive legal, social and cultural environment in which a person with disability can fully participate and enjoy her/his rights to freedom of expresson in the community. The article explained the Internet as a technological tool that can play a role to create a safe communication sphere and mode of expression and facilitate equal participation of people with disabilities in society. There appears to be no comprehensive study about the role of the Internet in amplifying the voices of people with disabilities in Ethiopia. There is no disaggregated data to present the digital divide in terms of disability, which could be taken as a future research area. The absence of statistical data could also negatively impact the efficacy of the Internet and AI systems initiatives that aspire to build a digital economy in Ethiopia. This article reflected how the Internet could be utilized to mute or unmute the voice of people with disabilities to exercise their freedom of expression online and offline. The study also reflects on the role of the Internet in the freedom of expression of persons with disabilities through examining stereotypical perceptions and portrayals of people with disabilities online and offline, inaccessibility of communication technologies, and gaps in policy and practice.

The right to freedom of expression and opinion is essential for persons with disabilities to develop their skills and participate in societies on an equal basis. However, full enjoyment of freedom of speech remains elusive for persons with disabilities as long as access, societal attitude, and policy barriers exist. Friendly access to digital technologies supported by policies to enhance such services is crucial to ensure disability inclusion in the right to free speech. Most importantly, the stereotyping of people with disabilities that can potentially interfere with the practice of designing and producing local technological solutions must be addressed.

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[69] Human Rights Commission Comment no.61, paragraph 7.

The draft proposed Access to Information Proclamation to the Council of Ministers in mid-2021 must recognize the importance of information and communication technologies to expand opportunities for people with disabilities to access official information. As such, it should serve as a legal document to enforce the web accessibility of government institutions for all and special consideration for the needs of people with disabilities to ensure citizens' rights to access official information and participate in policy matters. The Pathway to Prosperity and the Digital Ethiopia Strategy 2025 must also be revisited to devise approaches and directives to ensure disability inclusion by removing socioeconomic barriers for people with disabilities to benefit from the digital economy.

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