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Journalistic Roles and Political Parallelism in a Transitional Society: The Case of Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

The article is an assessment of journalistic role performance and political parallelism in an African media system, specifically Ethiopia. Transitional countries such as Ethiopia are often associated with high levels of political parallelism in the media landscape. However, the assumption tends to be drawn on the basis of ownership only, while the degree to which political parallelism transpires in journalistic role performance is rarely subject to systematic study. The article takes up the challenge by scrutinizing ten outlets representative of the private and state media sector in Ethiopia (print, radio, television and online). A total of 1200 stories were coded. Ownership appeared as a strong predictor of journalistic role performance. Among six pre-defined roles, four roles were predominant in the state media: interventionist, loyal-facilitator, service and civic roles. The watchdog and entertainment roles, on the other hand, dominated in the private media. A more nuanced analysis of the private media, however, found significant differences in role orientation between different media institutions. The differences are explained by media-political affiliations and changes in the country since 2018. The article argues that systematic analysis of media content can be a sophisticated method to study political parallelism in a country's media system.

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Introduction

The relationship between media and politics is a defining characteristic of media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956). Since the 1970s, and particularly after Hallin and Mancini (2004) proposed their three models of media and politics, the key indicator used in the research to describe the relationship between the media system and the political system in a society is that of political parallelism. The concept was first employed by Seymour-Ure (1974) as “press-party parallelism”, which pointed to the degree to which a media institution—specifically a print media outlet—had direct links with a political party. As party ownership of media institutions in Europe gradually became less common in the late twentieth century (Sjøvaag and Ohlsson 2020), the press-party parallelism concept was replaced by a more general notion referred to as simply “political parallelism”. Rather than describing direct ownership of

media institutions by political organizations, political parallelism refers to the overall reflection of the political system by the media in a given society. As pointed out by De Albuquerque (2020), the concept is interested in the way in which the media manifest agendas raised by political organizations, not the other way around. Political forces constitute the independent variable in the analysis, as it were.

Scholars differ somewhat in their view of what constitutes the most appropriate variable to identify political parallelism. Contemporary discussions often take Hallin and Mancini's (2004, 28) five indicators as a starting-point. Hallin and Mancini suggest that political parallelism is reflected in (1) media content; (2) organizational links between political institutions and the media; (3) political engagement by journalists and editors; (4) ideological sympathies of media audiences; and (5) journalistic role orientations and practices. The latter refers to the tendency of journalists to use the media to influence public opinion, or, to the contrary, their desire to stay neutral and purely informative in professional practice. Others reduce the indicators to three main areas: ownership, content, and audience ties (Van der Pas, van der Brug, and Vliegenthart 2017), or introduce a related indicator, such as the relationship between journalists and politicians (Maurer 2017), in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of parallelism in specific media societies. The slightly different definitions of political parallelism nevertheless do not constitute profoundly contradictory approaches. The different approaches all have in common that they consider political parallelism as an appropriate concept to describe the possible bonds that exist between the media and political organizations in a society.

The operationalization of political parallelism in empirical research, however, varies. Different approaches have been used to determine potential association between media and political actors, often focusing only on one dimension while paying less attention to others. The strongest indicator has probably been ownership ties and other organizational links between media institutions and political actors. Examples of research along this line are mapping of "media coalitions" in Western European countries (Artero 2015), analysis of ownership changes in Latvia (Rozukalne 2012), and tracking of financial sources of the Libyan media (Wollenberg and Richter 2020). Another strand in the research uses surveys to investigate political preferences among journalists (Selvik and Høigilt 2021), or audiences (Lelkes 2016), or a combination of the two (Curini, Garusi, and Splendore 2023). A third approach detects political parallelism by studying media content, either by means of qualitative or quantitative methods. A qualitative method has the potential to go in depth of one topic in a particular media culture, for example using critical discourse analysis to study the representation of Islam in editorials in the Australian press (Ghauri 2019), while a quantitative content analysis is suitable to compare multiple societies using a most similar systems design, such as comparing partisan journalism in German and Spanish online outlets (Kaiser and Kleinen-von Königslöw 2019). The latter approach, by using various types of quantitative methods to systematically compare media content, has become a highly popular method in studies of political parallelism across societies and platforms.

A relatively less used approach is researching political parallelism through systematic studies of journalistic role performance. The rationale behind such an approach is that the political alignment of media outlets is reflected in the professional roles which transpire in

media content. Indeed, the fifth and last of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) indicators is exactly "journalistic role orientations and practices" (28). However, the indicator is possibly the least investigated dimension of political parallelism in the research literature. There are a few notable exceptions, exemplified by a study which links journalistic performance of four Polish newspapers with their political orientation (Stępińska et al. 2016). Most research on political parallelism, however, appears to concentrate on either organizational, individual or content-related aspects without bringing up the question of journalistic role performance. The reason for this may not necessarily be that professional performance is considered to be less important, but is likely a consequence of the resource-demanding effort which a deep study of journalistic role performance requires. Journalistic role performance here points to the professional roles which emerge in actual output in different media channels, such as watchdog, loyal-facilitator roles and so forth. Studies of journalistic role performance thus contrast studies of role conceptions, which investigate journalists' perceived roles instead of professional performance (Mellado and van Dalen 2013). The assumption of studies on journalistic role performance in transitional societies is that the dominant roles in professional practice transpire in media content, thereby reflecting incentives such as political connections. The loyal role, for example, expresses government support. Hallin and Mancini (2004) have a slightly different emphasis when applying journalistic roles in their analysis of political parallelism in the Western hemisphere. The key issue for them is the distinction between commentary roles, which indicate strong political parallelism (e.g., Mediterranean countries), and news-gathering roles, which indicate weak parallelism (e.g., North America). The level of analysis is the country, querying which role is dominant on societal level. An alternative approach is to investigate journalistic roles on media channel level to find out variations between the outlets with the intention to compare the configuration of the media landscape with the political landscape in the same country.

The latter is the approach of this particular study. The aim is to demonstrate how empirical data on journalistic role performance represents a fruitful way to identify political parallelism among a collection of media outlets in one particular society. The country chosen for analysis is Ethiopia, which is one of two African countries that participated in the second wave of the Journalistic Role Performance project (data gathering 2020–2021). The country is a particularly interesting object for analysis of political parallelism because of recent fundamental shifts in the political landscape. A new political leadership which came to power in Ethiopia in 2018 brought a range of reforms which have had consequences for the media as well. The media landscape is more diverse than pre-2018, although the state-run media still retain a stronghold in the country. The general research question of the study is: To what extent does journalistic role performance as manifested in different Ethiopian media channels reflect political parallelism? The research has significance because it gives knowledge of journalistic roles in post-reform Ethiopia, but more generally, the study demonstrates how scrutiny of media content in a transitional society can be a viable method to identify systematic differences in political inclination between media channels.

Discussing political parallelism in a transitional country like Ethiopia first demands a discussion of the possibility of applying the concept in a non-Western society. Several scholars have problematized the use of the construct in cultures outside of the northern hemisphere, claiming that it contains assumptions that make it impractical for transitional

societies. My argument is that it is valid to refer to political parallelism in non-Western societies, although social conditions are different and often unpredictable. I will therefore briefly discuss the question of the universality of the political parallelism concept, before introducing the social and political context of Ethiopia.

Political Parallelism in Non-Western Societies

The political parallelism concept was initially coined to consider the relationship between media and politics in established democracies. Characteristically, Seymour-Ure's (1974) main focus was on Europe, in particular the United Kingdom. It is interesting to note that in Hallin and Mancini's (2004) treatment of political parallelism, the concept becomes particularly relevant when discussing media systems in Europe. This is, as suggested by De Albuquerque (2013), a result of the strong parliamentary tradition in Western Europe, where political parties play a key role in defining politics and where media outlets traditionally form a system of external pluralism. By contrast, the North American media are an exemplar of the internal pluralism system, where each media outlet entertains a range of views on the political spectrum in a neutral-objective reporting manner. Both the North American and the European political systems, however, are generally stable, characterized by competition between political actors. These two characteristics, stability and competition, are defined by De Albuquerque (2013) as prerequisites for politically parallel media systems. In De Albuquerque's view, it makes less sense to apply the political parallelism concept in societies which are marked by political instability or one-party rule. Case studies of media-politics relations in different non-Western regimes take a similar position. It is less useful to talk about political parallelism in Peru because the country's party system has collapsed, argues Protzel (2014). Kiriya (2017) finds political parallelism less relevant for the Russian media since the political party spectrum of the country is underdeveloped. A challenge when analysing the media in new democracies, according to Voltmer (2008; 2012), is the strong presence of clientelism and personal alliances which guide politics more than political parallelism in the classic sense. Relly, Zanger, and Fahmy (2015) suggest that the culture of patronage should be considered alongside political parallelism to understand Iraqi journalism. Speaking from a South African perspective, Hadland (2012) observes that parts of the media are party politicized, but it is a different type of political parallelism than in the European sense because although there are undoubtedly strong links between the media and political institutions, there is no tradition of commentary bias in South African journalism. Ciaglia (2017) proposes that "entrenched politicization" is a more appropriate concept than political parallelism when discussing the political alignment of the public broadcaster South African Broadcasting Company.

Despite the addressed concerns with political parallelism, the framework remains popular in research on media-politics relations in the Global South, perhaps increasingly so. The concept has been applied to make sense of the media across the globe on topics as diverse as Argentine media populism (Kitzberger 2023), secrecy in the Bangladeshi press (Ahmed 2012), partisanship in the Lebanese media (El-Richani 2021), and political conflict in the Libyan media (Wollenberg and Richter 2020). Furthermore, political parallelism is regularly applied in the analysis of media systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example in Botswana (Tutwane 2018), Nigeria (Yushu'a 2010), and, of particular relevance

for this study, in the investigation of Ethiopia's diaspora media (Bekele 2019). It is worthy of note that a number of contributions which criticize the use of the political parallelism concept for analyses of media in the Global South on the basis of its Western bias tend to replace the concept with similar or slightly modified models which by and large seem to cover the same notion as political parallelism (e.g., Chakravartty and Roy 2013; Pimentel and Marques 2021; Zhao 2012).

What the discussion boils down to, is perhaps not so much fundamental differences between Western and non-Western media systems, but what the political parallelism concept is meant to capture. The popularity of the concept beyond Western Europe and North America is likely to indicate that there is a need for a conceptual model which describes the persisting links between the media and political actors that are evident in many societies in the South. The local political scene may not resemble a competitive party system in the Western European sense, but full-blown multiparty democracy is not a prerequisite for the existence of political parallelism. A politicized media landscape can arise in different political systems, even authoritarian ones. A known situation from many African and Asian countries is that of a government coalition supported by strong state-owned media alongside a group of smaller private media channels which serve as critics of the regime either independently or on behalf of oppositional groups (Frère 2015; McCargo 2012). The asymmetrical media system in such societies could mirror the asymmetrical political system and hence materializes as a par excellence of political parallelism. State media institutions benefit from a symbiotic relationship with the government, but the coexistence of independent reporting ensures resistance to the official narrative. Journalists in Lebanon, for example, use a range of methods to report critically on the state power in a society characterized by instrumentalized political parallelism (Selvik and Høigilt 2021). The disruptive nature characterizing media in hybrid regimes may appear as a condition neutralizing political parallelism, but a disorderly media system could on the other hand be a reflection of the "normative ambiguities" of a hybrid political system (Voltmer, Selvik, and Høigilt 2021).

With this in mind, I argue that the concept of political parallelism is both useful and essential when assessing media systems outside of the democratic world. The condition that political parties are weaker in transitional societies than in established democracies is less relevant for the analysis. The core question to be asked is whether the different parts of the media are politically inclined in a manner which points towards the political configuration of the country. Additionally, the media-politics linkages should show some consistency and be persistent over time. Merely the fact that the media are used in a political campaign does not prove political parallelism. As pointed out by Mancini (2012), opportunistic and sporadic use of the media for political gain should be described as media instrumentalization, while political parallelism goes deeper and points to enduring linkages between the media system and the political system.

Ethiopian Media and Politics

The Ethiopian media have traditionally been government-controlled, but independent outlets gradually take up more space on the nation's media scene. Two junctures which coincide with political shifts mark important changes in the media situation—the years 1991 and 2018. In 1991, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic

Front (EPRDF) overthrew the Marxist Derg regime and opened up for private media channels for the first time since emperor Haile Selassie ruled the country (r. 1930–1974). Until 2007, nevertheless, the only non-governmental channels allowed alongside the state media were newspapers. Starting from the mid-1990s, independent journalism became severely suppressed and journalists began to flee the country by high numbers, especially after the contested 2005 elections (Abebe 2022). By 2015, only one country, Iran, had more journalists registered in exile than Ethiopia (HRW 2015). Journalists in the Ethiopian diaspora in Europe and America began to set up online media and satellite channels aimed at the homeland which became important sources for critical reporting on the Ethiopian regime (Skjerdal 2009, 2010).

At the same time, the media composition in the homeland gradually changed. Independent radios got licences from 2007, and television stations from 2017. Official “mass media agencies” were established in all eleven regions of the country with content produced for both television, radio, print and online media. These companies owned by the regional governments have grown to become large media houses, some with more than 500 journalists on staff. They compete with the formerly strong federal state media companies in the capital city Addis Ababa, where the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation is the flagship institution. Thus, one can today speak of “regionalization” of Ethiopian journalism, where ethnically aligned regional channels have considerable impact alongside federal state-owned and private channels (Ambelu 2022; Skjerdal 2023; Skjerdal and Alemayehu 2021).

In 2018, the government coalition EPRDF elected Dr. Abiy Ahmed as new party leader who in turn also became prime minister. Immediately after taking office, Abiy initiated wide-ranging political reforms which had effects on the media as well. All journalists who were in prison were released overnight in April 2018. Ethiopia, which had been a persistent laggard in media liberation, leaped unprecedently on the Reporters Without Borders’ World Press Freedom Index from 150th place in 2018 to 110th place in 2019, and improved further to 99th place in 2021. Many diaspora journalists returned and resumed their media operation in the homeland. One example is the journalists of an outlet which is part of the current study, Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio (ESAT), which had broadcasted from Washington DC, London and Amsterdam since 2010 before returning to Ethiopia in 2018 (Bekele 2019). Other positive developments following the change of leadership in 2018 were repeal of repressive media laws (Assefa and Goshu 2020) and the formalizing of the Ethiopian Media Council.

Recently, however, the media reforms have halted and started to go in the wrong direction. By 2023, Ethiopia had dropped to 130th place on the World Press Freedom Index. A number of journalists are in jail, and reports of crackdowns on the independent media are once again commonplace. The communication scene is complicated by political turmoil in the country. The civil war in the northernmost Tigray region 2020–2022 has been particularly damaging, resulting in censorship and a heavy communication ban combined with international media which have framed the Ethiopian government as authoritarian and anti-democratic (Abbink 2021). Even so, the number of private media companies in the country is higher than ever and the public has a fair range of information channels to choose between.

Politically speaking, Ethiopia can be described as a multiparty anocracy. The country has national elections every five years with participation from a range of political

parties, but many parties are ethnically based and the electorate tends to be regionally aligned (Abebe 2022; Gedamu 2022). Political organizations, including the federal and regional governments, are often accused of exploiting the media to advocate ethno-political interests (Dessie, Ali, and Moges 2023; Kebede and Tveiten 2023).

Research Hypotheses

Given the assumption of political alignment of the Ethiopian media, the study will investigate political parallelism in private media organizations versus the state-owned media. The study examines parallelism from two perspectives: that of media workers (journalists' perceptions) and in media content (journalistic performance). The primary assumption is that journalists working for different types of media will to some extent sympathize with the political bias of their own media organization. In accordance with Hallin and Mancini's (2004) political engagement indicator, journalists in the state-owned media are believed to support the government more than those who work for the private media, which typically are outlets leaning towards an oppositional standpoint (Salawu 2016; Svensson 2019). The assumption is supported by studies which find journalists to seek and exploit political proximity in their work (Ceron et al. 2019; Van der Goot, van der Meer, and Vliegenthart 2021), and journalists who experience a widening gap between their own mindset and that of their media outlet are prone to leave the organization (Kotisova and Císařová 2023). Along the same line, research from Western Europe suggests that journalists find their news outlet to be biased to accommodate the political preferences of its "imagined audience" (Soontjens et al. 2023). Data from the Worlds of Journalism Study found that journalists in the Ethiopian private media were slightly more opposition-minded than those working for the state media, although both groups clustered around the middle position where they neither identified with the government nor with the opposition (Skjerdal 2017). The first two parts of hypothesis 1 are therefore:

- H1a: Journalists in state media institutions are more government-friendly than those in the private media.
- H1b: Journalists in the state media regard their own organization as more government-friendly than those working in the private media.

As mentioned in the introduction, political parallelism theory also presupposes correspondence between the political orientation of media outlets and their audiences. In Ethiopian media regulation, the state media are officially registered as "public service media", whose mandate is to "provide contents that guarantee public interest" (FDRE 2021, clause 2(11)). The content is hence meant to target the entire population, demanding that the broadcaster's reporting should be "neutral and independent of government" (FDRE 2021, clause 2(11)). The common observation, nonetheless, is that the performance of the state media represents a "PR-driven journalism model" in favour of the government (Mohammed 2021). The trust in different state media organizations is low (Wolde and Woldearegay 2024). Different audience segments appear to prefer different types of media to the extent that they depart into "fractured publics", especially in the online sphere (Workneh 2021). Some private channels have close relationships with their audiences and benefit from support groups abroad who do fundraising for "their" particular

channel. A few outlets are known for political linkages, such as ESAT, which has persistently treated leaders of the opposition party Ginbot 7 favourably since they started broadcasting in 2010 (Bekele 2019). Audience orientation based on political preferences is well-known from global research (Dvir-Gvirsman 2017; Morris 2007; Stroud 2008), but journalists are also found to be less accurate in assessing the audience's actual political orientation (Beckers et al. 2021). Journalist perceptions of their target audience is however less investigated in the Ethiopian context. This leads to the last aspect of the first hypothesis:

- H1c: Audiences of the private media are regarded as more opposition-minded than state media audiences.

The other main area to be studied in addition to journalists' perceptions of various political sympathies is their role performance as expressed in media content. The postulation, as explained in the introduction, is that various journalistic roles are more predominant in media channels of certain political leanings than others. One would for example expect the loyal-facilitator role to dominate reporting in state media channels, where loyalty to government policy is the norm (Kalyango et al. 2017; Skjerdal 2017). Private media channels, on the other hand, tend to be associated with investigative and watchdog roles to a higher degree (Dejene 2013). Similar findings are evident in research from other contexts, such as Poland, where the watchdog role is more prominent among outlets with an oppositional leaning (Stępińska et al. 2016). Various studies indicate that journalists tend to agree that ownership has an effect on media content. A recent study from Cameroon, for example, found that 58.8% of the journalists felt that their owner often influenced the content either through policy guidelines, direct instructions, editing of news stories or sanctions (Forcha and Ngange 2022). Specific roles could also be associated with source bias. Research of Ethiopian news reporting practices suggests that the type of sources journalists use depends on the ownership of the media outlet (Moges 2021). This gives the following hypothesis:

- H2: Ownership is a key predictor of journalistic roles as reflected in media content.

At the same time, it is known that there are political differences between different outlets within the same ownership type. Not all private media in Ethiopia are government-critical. The best examples are Walta Information Center and Fana Broadcasting Corporate, both of which are officially recognized as private media companies (or "commercial" according to Ethiopian legislation), although they have a history of proximity to the ruling party (Reta 2013). One of these, Walta, is included in the study. Differences are also found in outlets concerning ethnic loyalties, regardless of whether they are private or state-owned (Dessie 2022). The final hypothesis is therefore:

- H3: The performance of various journalistic roles is significantly different between different private media houses.

Methodology

The study is based on data from the Journalist Role Performance project (JRP), which is a global comparative study between 37 countries (www.journalisticperformance.org). The

data used in this particular analysis, however, concerns only one country in the project, Ethiopia. This purpose is to analyse one case in depth in order to get insight of political parallelism in one particular society. The data collection was done in 2020 and 2021 and consists of two parts: content analysis of news stories, and survey of journalists working in the same organizations where the media content was sampled from. Ten Ethiopian news organizations were sampled—four state-owned and six private. The organizations were chosen to get the most dominant and popular media outlets within each ownership category (state/private) and platform type (radio/television/print/online). The sampled outlets from the state side were Ethiopian Radio and Ethiopian Television (both are institutions under a parent organization, Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation/EBC), Amhara Media Corporation (AMC, the largest company owned by a regional state) and *Ethiopian Herald* (national newspaper). The sampled outlets from the private side were Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio (ESAT, only television included in the study), Sheger FM (radio), *Addis Admas* (newspaper), *Reporter* (newspaper, limited to the English version), *Walta* (online) and *Addis Standard* (online). Some of the outlets use a range of languages, but the analysis was limited to the Amharic (the most widely spoken language in Ethiopia) and English departments. The media organizations vary a lot in size. The three state-owned broadcasting companies have between 190 and 400 journalists each, while the private companies have between eight and 50 journalists. This is reflected in the survey responses, which comprise altogether 50 respondents from the state media but only nine from the private media (purposive sampling).

The content analysis was conducted by means of two stratified-systematically constructed news weeks using the same dates for all media outlets throughout the year. All internally produced stories from the most popular news programme of each radio and television channel were included, as well as all published news stories on the particular day in the case of print and the Web. In the end, this means that between 80 and 209 stories were scrutinized from each media outlet (details given in [Table 4](#)). Overall, 1400 stories were sampled from the ten Ethiopian outlets included in the study. Each story was analysed using a standardized codebook with 100 variables. The analysis in this study is mainly limited to the part of the codebook dealing with journalistic roles. The JRP study operates with six predefined professional roles: interventionist, watchdog, loyal-facilitator, service, infotainment and civic (Mellado 2015). Each role was identified in the stories by means of positive/negative scores covering between five and ten indicators. The coding of the Ethiopian content was performed by two data collectors. The

Table 4. Percentage of stories containing multiple sources and multiple points of view.

Outlet	Ownership	Multiple sources/ points of view	Stories analysed (N)
<i>Ethiopian Herald</i>	State	0%	108
Ethiopian Radio	State	2.3%	176
Ethiopian Television	State	2.3%	175
Sheger FM	Private	2.8%	145
Amhara Media Corp	State	3.8%	160
Walta	Private	3.8%	80
ESAT	Private	5.0%	119
<i>Addis Admas</i>	Private	8.1%	148
<i>Reporter</i>	Private	10.0%	209
<i>Addis Standard</i>	Private	35.0%	80
			1400

mean intercoder reliability for the six journalistic roles was .79 on the Krippendorff alpha scale, ranging from .69 (watchdog role), via .70 (loyal role), 0.71 (interventionist role), 0.82 (service role), and 0.84 (civic role), to .96 (infotainment role).

The survey among journalists was filled in individually in the form of an online questionnaire. The respondents came out as more experienced ($m = 10.1$ ys) and older ($m = 35.1$ ys) than the average Ethiopian journalist (Skjerdal 2017). However, the intention of the survey was not to acquire a representative sample of Ethiopian journalists, but to get the opinions of reporters and editors who were engaged in producing content for the media outlets sampled in the particular study. A major part of the survey consisted of questions related to journalistic norms and performance. However, the part of the survey applied in this analysis is a section querying about political preferences and perceptions. Of the total 65 journalists who responded to the survey, 59 (90.8%) chose to answer the questions about political identification. This is a high turnout, as political identification is known to be sensitive in Ethiopia. A similar question asked in the Worlds of Journalism Study received fewer responses—74.3% (Skjerdal 2017).

Findings

Perceived Political Orientation of Journalists, Media Institutions and Audiences

The first part of the research concerns the political leaning of journalists, media institutions and audiences. The findings must be treated with some caution, since only journalists were asked in the survey. Hence, it is their perception of political inclination which is in focus, which may or may not coincide with the actual inclination of audiences and media organizations.

The survey questions demand a second methodological note. Respondents were asked to place political sympathies on a scale from 0 to 10. In the survey used for most other countries in the JRP study, respondents identified political opinion on a left–right continuum, which is a common measurement in industrialized countries. African party politics, as in the case of Ethiopia, generally does not relate to the left–right spectrum (Elischer 2012). Since Ethiopian respondents would be unfamiliar with the spectrum, a modified scale was used which went from “pro-government” (value = 0) to “oppositional” (value = 10). The same continuum has been used in other studies (Skjerdal 2017).

The first hypothesis proposed that journalists in state media institutions were more government-friendly than those in the private media (H1a). The hypothesis was not confirmed. State media journalists emerged as leaning mildly towards the government in personal political position ($m = 4.68$, see Table 1). Journalists in the private media,

Table 1. Journalists’ reported political affiliation (individual, institutional and public), means.

	State media (N = 50)	Private media (N = 9)
Where would you place yourself on the political spectrum? (H1a)	4.68 (s.d. = 2.71)	4.11 (s.d. = 2.42)
Where would you place your organization? (H1b)	2.84 (s.d. = 2.28)	3.89 (s.d. = 2.29)
Where would you place the typical target audience of your medium? (H1c)	4.48 (s.d. = 2.79)	4.67 (s.d. = 2.74)

Scale 0–10 where 0 = pro-government and 10 = oppositional.

however, identified even more with government ideology ($m = 4.11$). The finding is surprising given that we expected to find more government-critical journalists in the private media. In comparison, the Worlds of Journalism Study—which in contrast to the JRP study aims to be representative for the overall journalist population in Ethiopia—found the opposite pattern ($m = 4.72$ for private media journalists; $m = 4.08$ for state media journalists). Both surveys, however, conclude that journalists in either ownership type gravitate towards the centre position on the political spectrum rather than appearing as strongly pro-government or anti-government.

Interestingly, both groups of journalists perceive their own organization as more government-friendly than themselves. The state media organizations are seen as particularly pro-government, as expected ($m = 2.84$). More surprisingly, the journalists in the private media also view their organization as relatively biased in favour of the government ($m = 3.89$). The difference between the two ownership types is still significant, which means that H1b is confirmed.

Part three of the first hypothesis proposed that audiences of the private media are regarded as more opposition-minded than state media audiences (H1c). The hypothesis is confirmed, but the gap between the perceived political sympathy of the two audience groups is small ($m = 4.48$ vs. $m = 4.67$). Journalists across the board regard their target audience as rather centralized politically speaking, though leaning slightly towards the government.

We should however note that the standard deviation for each of the indicators is relatively high (between 2.28 and 2.79), which means that the political perceptions are less unison. In terms of further analysis it would have been beneficial to test the perceptions against for example media outlet. However, the response rates for the different private media institutions are too small to validate an analysis on media outlet level (between one and five respondents per unit, plus two outlets which had no respondents). The analysis in this part is therefore kept on general ownership level only.

Journalistic Role Performance in State Media vs. Private Media

The second part of the study concerns journalistic roles on the basis of content analysis data. The key issue is the possible correlation between ownership and professional roles. To test H2, media ownership is used as independent variable and journalistic role as dependent variable. The results are telling (Table 2). In most cases, media ownership becomes a strong predictor of journalistic role performance. Four of the roles are associated with the state media (interventionist, loyal-facilitator, service and civic), while the remaining two are dominant in the private media (watchdog and infotainment). The

Table 2. Differences in performed journalistic roles between private and state media (state media set to zero).

Dependent variable	B	Std. error	t	Sig.
Interventionist role	-.043	.009	-4.706	<.001
Watchdog role	.015	.005	3.255	.001
Loyal-facilitator role	-.027	.007	-3.725	<.001
Service role	-.041	.006	-6.271	<.001
Infotainment role	.016	.005	2.993	.003
Civic role	-.021	.005	-3.952	<.001

highest gap is found in the interventionist role ($B = -0.43$, $\text{Sig} \leq .001$, state media set to zero, cf. Table 2). This is a role which propagates change. In the Ethiopian sample, it is not so much the journalist's point of view which gives interventionism a high score, but the use of first person in the stories, particularly in programmes on state radio and television. A pertinent example is the use of the pronoun "we" to make the audience feel inclusive and to bring the nation together, as if the media and citizens (and the government) join forces to work for social change. This echoes previous research where the change agent role has been highlighted as one of the two key roles for Ethiopian journalists—the other being the loyalist role (Skjerdal 2017). In contrast, the private media score significantly lower on both the interventionism and loyalty dimension.

A third role which emerges as remarkably stronger in the state media is the service role. The role highlights aspects of journalism which can help people in their daily life. The dimension of the role which is particularly manifested in the Ethiopian sample is the tips and advice indicator focusing on possible solutions to problems that people face in their life. Rather than covering internal conflict issues (Moges 2017), the Ethiopian state media are known to practice a development journalism style which redirects the attention from negative aspects of the developmental state to potential opportunities (Skjerdal 2011). The service role detected in the sample should be read towards this backdrop, which could also partly explain why another role, the civic role, comes out as stronger in the state media than in the private media. Both these roles, however (service and civic), are less predominant than either the interventionist or loyal-facilitator role. Overall, H2 is confirmed, implying that ownership is a key predictor of journalistic roles in the researched material. The differences in the four mentioned roles (interventionist, loyal-facilitator, service and civic) are also statistically significant ($\text{sig.} < .001$, 95% confidence interval).

Variations Within the Private Media

Despite the general differences between the private media and the state media, the suspicion was that within the private media outlets, there would be significant variation in the role orientation (H3). This hypothesis was confirmed as well. The statistical analysis

Table 3. Breakdown of the loyal-facilitator and watchdog roles in different private media outlets (state media set to zero).

Dependent variable	B	Std. error	t	Sig.
Loyal-facilitator role (mean)	-.027	.007	-3.725	<.001
- ESAT	-.034	.012	-2.877	.004
- Sheger FM	-.066	.011	-5.967	<.001
- Addis Admas	-.086	.011	-7.877	<.001
- Reporter	-.036	.010	-3.784	<.001
- Walta	.195	.014	12.796	<.001
- Addis Standard	-.031	.014	-2.209	.027
Watchdog role (mean)	.015	.005	3.255	.001
- ESAT	.009	.008	1.044	.297
- Sheger FM	.007	.008	.960	.337
- Addis Admas	.009	.008	1.247	.213
- Reporter	-.008	.007	-1.203	.229
- Walta	-.007	.010	-.675	.500
- Addis Standard	.134	.010	13.675	<.001

once again uses the state media as default position, in order to show how each of the six different private outlets either supports or rejects a role in relation to the generally dominant state media (Table 3). We are particularly interested in testing the hypothesis towards one role which is often associated with the state media—the loyal-facilitator role—and towards one role which is more commonly associated with the private media—the watchdog role (Kalyango et al. 2017; Skjerdal 2017).

For the loyal-facilitator role, all private outlets except one—Walta—show far less support than the state media. The result underscores Walta's traditionally supportive role of the government. In fact, Walta appears as an outlier even in relation to the state media outlets. The private outlet Walta is far more loyal than most state-owned outlets ($B = .195$, cf. Table 3). For the watchdog role, all private outlets except two—Walta and Reporter—score higher than the state media. Most notably, one private outlet, Addis Standard, scores particularly high on the watchdog role and becomes an outlier both in relation to the state media outlets and vis-à-vis all other private outlets. A closer assessment of the data material shows that Addis Standard scores higher than all other outlets on all ten indicators used to identify watchdog journalism. This includes for example stories about judicial processes; expression of doubt and criticism of actions of powerful groups; disclosure of abuses; extensive journalistic investigation; and expression of conflict between the media outlet and people in power. Addis Standard is indeed the only one of the ten researched Ethiopian outlets where investigative journalism is found, defined as “extensive inquire and research beyond reliance on leaks and secondary sources of information”. This is another exemplification of differences that exist within the private media industry.

The variations between different outlets can be studied further by applying other relevant indicators, such as diversity in sources and point of view. The assumption would be that lack of source diversity is correlated with unilateral coverage like the one found in official reporting. On the contrary, diversity in sources and points of view is expected to be more predominant in independent outlets. A scrutiny of the sources confirms the assumption (Table 4). The appearance of multiple points of view is consistently higher in private channels than in state-owned ones. That is, the private radio station Sheger FM is an exception, with only 2.8% of the stories containing multiple points of view. This however could perhaps be explained by the sampling, as the scrutinized material from Sheger FM consisted of short 3 min news bulletins which usually do not invite diverse sourcing. Sheger FM is generally considered a channel of decent journalistic standard with fair degree of autonomy. The other private channels stand out as presenting multiple views, particularly Addis Standard, corroborating the watchdog role orientation mentioned earlier.

Discussion

Ethiopia is an anocracy (semi-democracy) with an historically dominant ruling party. Opposition parties have been allowed since 1991, but the opposition has been fragmented with little influence on national level. On regional level, various ethnic-based parties have dominated the political scene, but most of these have been affiliated to or have been directly attached to the federal ruling coalition EPRDF. The dominant media organizations on national level have traditionally been the federal state broadcasters, but media

companies owned by the regional governments have gained increased influence since around 2010. This study, however, was conducted after Abiy Ahmed took over as prime minister in 2018 and initiated major reforms, which included the transformation of the ruling coalition EPRDF into the Prosperity Party (PP). Political parties which previously had been designated as terrorist groups by the Ethiopian parliament, such as Ginbot 7, were legalized and their leaders were invited back into the country. In parallel, media channels which had operated from the diaspora for years could return to the homeland after their activities were no longer under threat by Ethiopian authorities. The national election in 2021, nevertheless, resulted in a landslide victory for PP, winning 454 of the 470 seats in the House of Representatives. This excludes 122 seats which were left vacant due to the conflict in the Tigray region where legally recognized elections are yet to be held.

The study shows that the media scene in Ethiopia is still largely divided along political lines. The four state media outlets which were included in the research (three federal and one regional) score high on the interventionist and loyal-facilitator dimensions, which are classic roles associated with the state media (Skjerdal 2017). By contrast, the private media as a group shows high performance of the watchdog and infotainment roles. However, the study also draws attention to the relative diversity which exists within the private media. On the one end of the spectrum is Walta Information Center, which has been a *de facto* conduit for the government since its inception (Reta 2013). The study indicates that the predisposition of Walta has not changed much with the recent changes in Ethiopia. Despite being officially registered as a commercial media outlet, Walta performs higher on the loyal-facilitator role than the average state media institution, and correspondingly less on the watchdog role (Table 3). Other private media institutions are in the other end of the spectrum, especially the online outlet Addis Standard, which scores exceptionally high on watchdog journalism. Its reporting is critical and investigative. The source diversity is high—24% of its stories contain more than five sources, and the story with the most number of sources has no less than 16 sources quoted in a single article. In terms of possible linkages, the political leaning of Addis Standard is less evident from the researched material. Editorials and op-eds are often government-critical with a slant of Oromo bias, but commentaries are not part of the sampled material. Journalistic articles in Addis Standard are critical to both the government and oppositional groups, although criticism of the government appears as the standard.

An interesting case of political linkages is ESAT, which was mentioned earlier as a government-critical channel that began broadcasting from Europe and the US in 2010. Its webpage and satellite broadcasts were blocked by Ethiopia due to the presumed affiliation with the opposition party Ginbot 7. The content on the channel was highly critical of the Ethiopian government (Bekele 2019). When the parliament removed Ginbot 7 from the official terrorist list in 2018, ESAT returned to Ethiopia and opened offices in Addis Ababa (Skjerdal and Alemayehu 2021). The analysis in this study suggests that the political shifts are reflected in ESAT's content as well. The programmes do not appear as particularly opposition-minded. The station's role orientation is slightly more watchdog-oriented and slightly less loyal than the mean values for the state media (Table 3), but ESAT's approach appears to be far removed from the former rebel channel (Bekele 2019). In other words, the shifts seen in the Ethiopian political landscape since 2018 coincide with the shifts in the media landscape. Once labelled a terrorist by the Ethiopian

government, the former leader of Ginbot 7, Berhanu Nega, has been pardoned by the government and was appointed minister of education in 2021. In similar vein, ESAT is today recognized as a mainstream media channel in Ethiopia, with a role orientation comparable with several other private outlets.

The survey with journalists in the concerned outlets confirms that there is a persisting difference in the perception of the political orientation of state media outlets versus private media outlets. This finding in itself is not sufficient evidence of political parallelism in the Ethiopian media, but taken together with the content analysis data, the overall research evidence points to substantial parallelism between media outlets and the political configuration of the country.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to investigate to what extent political parallelism can be identified through studying journalistic roles in media content in selected outlets of different ownership in a transitional society. The content analysis found clear alignment of the six pre-defined roles along the private/state ownership axis. However, equally important, a larger gap between the different roles was found within the group of private media outlets alone than between privately owned and state-owned media. The gap was explained with the current political situation in Ethiopia, where media which are officially designated as private range from oppositional to highly government-loyal, and where some media outlets which used to be critical have turned neutral or pro-government after the regime change in 2018. One of the lessons drawn from the analysis is thus that analyses of political linkages in a hybrid society could prove insufficient if based in mapping of ownership type alone, and that supplementary investigation of journalistic role performance could lead to a more nuanced analysis of political parallelism.

The study has some methodological limitations that should be mentioned. As already pointed out, the survey with journalists yielded few responses among workers in the private media. The findings in this part of the study should be used with some caution. The content analysis, on the other hand, contains considerable data from each of the ten studied outlets. The limitation in the content analysis rests more with the interpretation of the different journalistic roles. Few of the stories in the Ethiopian sample matched more than one or two indicators, even if each role included a battery of up to ten indicators. For example, it may come as a surprise that the study found presence of watchdog journalism in the Ethiopian state media, but this could be explained by the appearance of “soft” indicators which should not be confused with committed investigative journalism. On the other hand, the same set of indicators are used for all media outlets, which implies that comparison between the outlets is meaningful even if some of the individual indicators leaves room for interpretation. The coding process is also a potential source of error. An intercoder reliability score on the Krippendorff alpha scale of 0.69 for the least consistent role (the watchdog role) implies discrepancy in some of the coded material.

Despite these limitations, the focused study on Ethiopian journalism demonstrates why political parallelism is a meaningful and crucial concept to be used in the analysis of media–politics relations in a transitional society. Whereas research on political

parallelism has often been limited to identification of ownership ties and analyses of organizational and individual political inclination, a study of journalistic role performance as expressed in media content represents a nuanced method to examine political tendencies in a nation's media landscape. It does, however, require systematically gathered material from a representative sample of media outlets.

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