

Somali Media: Ethics, Truth and Integrity

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"I haven't voted since 1964, I don't want to get my judgment involved in what I do for a living"
Jim Lehrer, PBS, News Hour.

Background:

In recent years Somali journalism, Islam and Somali music have become the easiest areas to penetrate without any previous experience or training. In other words anyone can claim to be a respected Sheikh, a journalist and a musician in this civil war era. In some ways apart from a few shining new stars the so called *"Wejiya Xun"* musicians who do nothing more than karaoke lip sync killed the field for the original great singers of yesteryear. Similarly journalism is facing the same dilemma. The high tech internet age of today's 24 hour cable journalism is much different from the time the first graduate program in Journalism was established at Columbia in 1912, with a grant from New York Editor and Publisher Joseph Pulitzer. Back then the complex world of news reporting was highly specialized.ⁱ With the arrival of lab tops, desk-top publishing, easy access to the internet, and affordable equipments such as digital cameras and audio recording the flood gates have opened.

In most well established media outlets Op/Ed and news pieces are reported and presented in very distinct ways. However, this practice is often not the case in media outlets managed by Somalis including well established media outlets that carry Somali services. In some cases the news and opinions carried by them are often very predictable. Somali run media in general may lack journalistic ethics due mainly to the endless war that has devastated the country for nearly two decades. As a matter of fact the tribal influences and lack of maturity, experience and accountability maybe a direct reflection of the broken down systems in Somalia. But the continuous lack of professionalism in these areas is nonetheless a cause for concern. Copycat, plagiarism and a lack of originality is rampant in many Somali run media in this day and age where everyone desires to be a media outlet in an environment where news comes from haphazard means and media outlets are set up in an ad hoc manner. It's therefore not surprising to encounter media outlets mimicking each other and at times copying information verbatim from one websites or another without the least care for originality. In fact the past few years many agencies and association have become the goose that lay the golden egg for many individuals as they falsely claim to represent the entire Somali media when in fact their activity does not go beyond their own interests, tweet propaganda and income by the millions.

Some argue that most Somali run media that exist today cater to a pre-tuned audience that expect the media to carry certain news that promote their own believes and perspective. The late writer Mohamed Saleeban may Allah bless his soul once wrote an interesting piece for WardheerNews titled ["Pre-tuned Audience"](#)ⁱⁱ. Mohamed eloquently stated: *"They are shy of speaking their conscience. Their contents are predictable, if you are not writing what is expected*

of you as a priori by your pre-tuned bunch that surrounds you either physically or influentially, then you must be silent”.

Moreover, some news outlets even go further to fabricate news to fit their interest and maybe to lure new readers. Case in point, on July 23, 2009 a sensationalist Somali website put out some shocking photos of what they referred to at the time as Somali student being **slaughtered and cut into pieces** in Malaysia. Fortunately, the Somali student association in Malaysia quickly repudiated the fabrications and provided evidence that the story was manufactured. The Somali students made available the source of the photos which the said website downloaded directly from the internet. This outrageous irresponsible tabloid reporting is tarnishing the image of some hard working few who desire to report genuinely about important news.

Somali Websites:

The average Somali *maryoolay* of today is glued to the internet to get his news and information from a plethora of Somali news sources. In essence people patronize these websites to get what they believe to be the most trusted news, in many cases because the website is their clan website of choice...

Despite the fact that it's difficult to get an accurate record of Somali websites because they come and go, there are roughly 400 Somali websites and to quote writer Bashir Goth, most are what he refers to “ [Anna waa ikan](#) ”ⁱⁱⁱ. In other words websites are mushrooming for no other meaningful reason but to merely exist. There is no mission or objectives other than to just begin another tribal website with people who obviously have time and an agenda that is blurred with misinformation.

Poet Mohamed Hirad summed up the quality of Somali media in a poem, when I asked him about his thoughts about Somali media;

<i>Mareegaha xad dhaafka ah</i>	<i>Xasaraddoodu badantahay</i>
<i>Ummaddii xabiibka ahayd</i>	<i>Iyagaysku xuuxshoo</i>
<i>Xaasidnimo Ku beeroo</i>	<i>Xudduumahooda kala furay</i>
<i>Dabadeed xumaan iyo</i>	<i>Xabadday ku baaqeen</i>
<i>Shacabkii xaalaashaha ahaa</i>	<i>Waa kuwaa xabaaliyo</i>
<i>Xeryo qaxoonti lagu guray</i>	<i>wax intaa ka xeeldheer</i>

<i>B. B. C. xaggeediyo</i>	<i>V. O. A da xigatana</i>
<i>Xarkaynta beentiyo</i>	<i>Xayaysiis dad gaaroo</i>
<i>Qabiil lagu xaglinayaa</i>	<i>Kuwo xiiqsan qayshaan</i>
<i>Xeegaan ku helayaan</i>	<i>Darna laga xannibayaa</i>
<i>Xaq inay ku baaqaan</i>	

*Mushrooming they are, these websites
Doers of evil, they created hate
They assured graves for some and refugee camps for others
The BBC and VOA have become experts in lies, and division
Truth and peace never their agenda*

Poem by M. Hirad.

During the height of the zonal warlord period in Mogadishu, some websites were financed by ruthless Mogadishu warlords and were acting as their mouth piece. It was not strange to come across with those warlords using their tribal website to disseminate venom and hate against perceived threat. In fact, some may argue that the era of well financed websites by a clan warlord or head of a region still prevails, and these well financed but poorly run websites are nothing more than a propaganda mouth piece.

The tragedy that has in recent years engulfed the area of Somali journalism has indeed produced under trained so called journalists with no experience and poor command of the Somali language, filing reports with similar news for various websites using different pen names. The Somali literature in general and Somali language in particular has been abused and it has seen deterioration. There is no usage of a standard language and furthermore no consistency in spelling, language and content. If one attempts to read news items written by these self declared journalists, one is unable to recognize the language let alone read it, some of the common but strange terms that you will see on a daily basis in Somali news reporting are the use of the terms such as; *Ethiopia, ethiopia, itobiya, atobiya, itoobiya* etc. Indeed, it's the mutilation of the Somali language which has seen its demise on the rise of these websites. Imagine the good old days when Radio Hargeisa, Mogadishu and the BBC were the place to learn the richest and most creative Somali literature. Imagine the many that sat in front of the radio and waited for the different programs to air. That was then, at the present time it stuns me to see the quality of news reporting in a giant media such as BBC Somali services with all of its resources to be no much different than a poorly run website. In recent years, however, we have seen some gifted writers such as Abdirahman Barwaaqo and [Liban Ahmed](#)^{iv} who have taken this daunting task of the downfall of the Somali language in the hands of this lot and the work needed to address it. Liban Ahmed has eloquently written on the quality of BBC Somali service website in an article titled "[Ma tifaftire bay u baahan tahay Mareegta BBC Somali.com](#)"^v or "*Does the Somali service of the BBC website in need of an editor*"...

It's important to note that some media such as most of the Somaliland websites which write news items that although ridden with un-tasty tribal opinion that is polarizing at best are mostly readable, original and sometimes rhythmic Somali language. On the other hand some websites such as the pro secessionist Somaliland websites distance themselves from the

majority of Somali websites as if that alone will ensure or delay Somaliland's long sought independence. These websites carry a very limited coverage when it comes to Somali news and are becoming irrelevant, as they are totally missing the news stories outside of their periphery.

These sectarian websites do not even list or link other Somali websites. In essence they only list websites that mostly belong to their group. Contrary to them, most of the other Somali websites link all existing Somali websites, organizations and radio stations. This linking is actually a useful tool where reader accessibility is enhanced. Equally, there are pro union, anti Somaliland tabloid news outlets or websites that are created solely to counter the secessionist agenda.

It's also important to note that the Diaspora has a huge part in running websites and somewhat contribute to the division that is present in Somali websites today. Most of the information disseminated on these websites is in the most part created by Diaspora Somalis. In a large part we can say the Diaspora sets the tone for what will be put in these websites. The end users of Somali websites, particularly those that are in Somalia and other parts of the world receive these materials as truth, not comprehending that the information is mostly opinion and commentary. In addition the audiences fail to understand the bias of websites they support. It may not even occur to them that each website has an agenda to report the news, articles and information in general in the way their audiences expect.

Missing from most Somali websites of today is the ability of the editors to separate their personal feelings, interest and tribal affiliations from the news. Somali run media often are laden with hate and propaganda that should be reserved for the tea house and pal-talk. The news should be reported without investing so much emotion. Also most Somali media do not provide space for people with opposing views. The editors who run these media fail to understand that giving their audience a totality of a viewpoint including those that do not agree with them will give their audience more to choose from instead of the same old tune which tends to get boring.

Quality of media serving Somali readers or listeners:

The quality of reporting is often determined by: 1) objectivity of the media, 2) the manner in which the news is reported, 3) target audience, 4) the originality of the news media (does the site copy and paste news, articles and analysis) or does it publish original news and articles with original thought, ideology and analysis in a manner unique to the site and 5) does the media editorialize current issues.

While researching this article I put forward questions relating to the topic of Somali media, journalistic ethics and quality of news reporting to a number of people including members of WardheerNews editorial board. I also forwarded questions from the research to a wide range of media outlets and individuals and others representing different websites across the Somali inhabited regions, notably Somaliland times and Hiiraan online included, however I will only present herewith only those who responded to my inquiry.

First, Osman Hassan a former BBC journalist who has written extensively about the downfall of the BBC reflected on the issue, his response is as follows: *“What is spectacular about the Somali media is its exponential growth. Over the last two decades - since the collapse of the Somali State and a Somali Diaspora established itself all around the world - Somali internet websites have mushroomed. Apart from few exceptions, the overwhelming majority of the Somali internet websites are clan or regional oriented, and are run by some people who seem to have no appropriate journalistic or media expertise or background. Much as their output is of low journalistic quality, still they have a demand since they cater for a captive readership who are mostly attracted to specific websites by clan or regional loyalty and also because they cherish the focus on clan-related issues. Such websites pay little attention or respect to impartiality, objectivity and fair play. For serious readers looking for an impartial, good quality website, the choice in the end boils down to around few websites”.*

As for foreign radios, the BBC Somali Service and VOA’s Somali Programmes are the most prominent. The much vaunted impartiality of the BBC World Service has always been the mantra of its management. Clearly, there is no absolute impartiality and objectivity and everything is relative. The BBC World Service could certainly have claimed in the past to be far more objective than other competing foreign radios like VOA, Radio Moscow, Radio Cairo, etc. But that claim no longer holds. VOA’s Somali Service could rightly claim to be more impartial than its rival, the BBC Somali Service. The fact of the matter is that the hard-earned reputation of the Somali Service since its inception has been squandered since Yusuf Garaad became its head not its Somali listeners but clan and personal interests”.

I asked Ahmed Hassan, an editor and WardheerNews board member of what he thinks of the Somali media ethics: *“For a people who are born poets with creative minds, and artistic originality, the Somalis of today, especially those who have chosen the field of journalism have sadly abandoned their creative nature for quick copy and paste style that has engulfed the Somali media in general and Somali websites in particular as of late. It’s indeed disconcerting to see quality and originality abandoned for a quick gain”...*

The more the merrier, says Syed Ahmed Gashan of Radio Daljir. He adds, “In principle, it’s my view, like any other industry, Somali journalism, which is at its infant rostrum at the moment, shall mature developing inherently self-filtering mechanisms whereby audience shall ultimately demand quality cum balance from their respective news sources, and those which fail, shall cease to operate as an on-going concern whereas others shall pop up in their stead. For instance, the BBC Somali service hardly commands the same audience base as it did a couple of years ago, nor does the VOA Somali service as it did a few months ago; and the same shall apply to other Somali media outlets including radio stations and online bloggers some of whom no longer attract meaningful followship. Here, the more informed the listener, the wider the spectrum, the higher the bar, the less tolerance for mediocrity, and therefore the more critical the reader grows. In other words, a journalist or a news outlet, which neither observes the code of ethics of the profession, nor possesses the essential ingredients of the language, shall wilfully not weather the whirling wind”

" Although there is a mushrooming of Somali websites in recent years, they are mostly clan-centered or region-centered and they have neither qualitative orientation nor palatable editorial policy. As a matter of fact, they are mostly a liability rather than an asset." Says Bashir Gardaad, a writer and former senior officer of African development Bank.

Khaliil Hassan WardheerNews editor and an editorial board member expressed his bewilderment as he was one person who suffered in the hands of few websites plagiarizing his work: *"It's at times embarrassing when individual's who write article by investing a lot of time and energy is plagiarized and posted in other websites with a different name. It amazes me even further when I get no response or an apology from the individuals running these websites. While naming names is not necessary at this juncture, it's extremely dismaying to keep originality when other websites do not respect the code of journalistic ethics that all Somali websites should follow"*

Media Bias:

It's inevitable when we talk about the media as it exists today that some bias will exist with all media outlets whether it's the infant Somali media or age old ones such as the main American media outlets. Today the major news outlets such as CNN, ABC, NBC, BBC and other media giants report to a targeted audience. Their reporting reflects the interests of their base. A case in point is when NBC realized the Pulitzer prize-winning reporter Peter Arnett, a New Zealand-born US citizen on April 2003, after giving an interview to a Iraqi television in the early days of the Iraq war and portrayed the US war plan as "failed". Mr. Arnett was sacked because he deviated from the expected message; instead he responded in an honest and forward manner which digressed from the message that NBC expected. Needless to say such incidents are plenty in major media outlets of today when reporters diverge from the expected message. Dan Rather and Bill Moyer are other examples of tenured respected journalists who have suffered under the ax for not staying on message.

The Arabic media giants Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabia do not exactly have the same audience however professional conduct and media integrity are a must for all these media outlets. For example Al-Jazeera which is the most popular media outlet in the Arab world puts to shame government mouth piece propaganda radios that had for years engulfed the Arab world. It's however despised in America for its reporting. During the Iraq war Al-Jazeera had reported from Bagdad in areas where western media outlets couldn't access. As far as reporting styles, Al-jazeera did not shy away from reporting the bloody war in Iraq while American media outlets mostly followed US government policy to broadcast a bloodless war for their audiences. As such audiences rarely saw any dead soldiers in body bags. And as far as the American media is concerned the Iraqi people's plight and their many loses in the war was given very mediocre coverage unless there was something to report for political purposes. In fact, the Iraq war witnessed the most biased reporting in American journalism and in some cases many American journalists were hesitant to ask hard question about the Bush administration which did away with much of the freedoms journalism had enjoyed for centuries. In other cases it was difficult to tell the difference between the Bush administration officials and the journalists.

They often spoke with the same tone and at times it seemed as if what was reported had to be approved by the administration. For that reason when Al-jazeera English came to pass it become popular to a brand new American audience who choose it for its controversial yet desired reporting. Similarly the recent departure of Fathia Absie from the VOA Somali service is a blow to its listeners, Fathia alleged the head of the Somalia service Mr. Abdirahman Yebarow of politicizing the service and turning it into a clan entity. Surely listeners of the service will notice her departure.

As more and more interest based news outlets spur out of control, the audience should filter through what they read and hear, thus making their own judgment. There is however few media outlets that rise above self interest. The option is therefore for the audience to tune in to a variety of media outlets ranging from Aljazeera to Fox News, which in today's sensational based short bite news environment provides choice. It must however be noted that even though bias may exist, media outlets should always follow ethically balanced and integrity ridden systems that assure accountability and excellence in reporting standard.

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is the most heinous and rampant act committed by almost anyone who calls himself a writer today. In most cases original researched work is copied, and published never giving the source of the work while omitting the author's name, and contact information. Plagiarism in the Somali media context is something that is gaining momentum and in need to address it, as the saying goes "*delay is the deadliest form of denial*". It's disheartening to watch original work which is copied and pasted, purposefully mutilating parts of the work to have a certain effect. Lately this is becoming a commonplace for Somali websites. This is due in many cases to the fact that some of the people running websites and those who write for it are often amateur and may not even comprehend the big deal about plagiarism. In an equalizing environment like the internet where people can claim titles they have not earned, this is to be expected.

Ibrahim Hawd, a freelance writer and an author of several books in the Somali language whose work has met with plagiarism, wrote an article with the heading "[Waxa aad jeclaato ha xadin](#)"^{vi} loosely translated as "don't plagiarize material if you adore it" when he came across one of his articles originally published in WardheerNews and other Websites being plagiarized. There are countless number of materials ranging from research, thesis and articles written by Somalis and non Somalis which are being plagiarized without any permission or consent from their authors. Ismail A Hassan (khaliil) wrote on the same topic in an article titled "[Tuugow Mareegaale](#)"^{vii} or "Online thieves" by elaborating on this new breed of thieves who plagiarize the hard work, research and findings of others simply to make a name for themselves.

In relation to respect for copy rights Mr. Osman Hassan responded: "*Respect for copy rights is stronger in countries where they have long established legal and institutional mechanisms and where its enforcement is taken for granted. People in such countries, as law-abiding citizens, have come to respect copy rights just as they respect other laws of their*

countries and know the penalties they face if they infringe copy rights. That mindset is not shared by people coming from a lawless country like Somalia where respect for the law is non-existent or not part of the Somali psyche. Plagiarising is similar to copy right infringement to the extent that it entails appropriating other people's work without their permission and compensation. In both cases, they are liable to sued in copy right law enforcing countries”.

Countless Somali media outlets have suffered in the hands of these plagiarists, among them are Raxanreeb and SBC radio whose work is mutilated.

Gashan on the issue of plagiarism and copy rights had this to say: *“The concepts of plagiarism cum copyright hardly register with many Somali media operators, albeit appears to be gaining some attraction more so now than when most online bloggers started their own commentary on current political affairs. For instance, at times one comes across a news story which has no references, yet infers other sources, but neither cited nor credited, and when one raises the question with the blogger, insolence comes back the response more often than not. Some hardly recognise error to have been committed, let alone acknowledge transgression on their part. Here, professional training and schooling might address the concept of plagiarism”.*

Conclusion:

While taking into account the infancy of the booming Somali websites, there is a lack of maturity and the learning curve is still ongoing. Let us remember the Somali society is coming from a dictatorship environment where only national owned media existed, therefore, freedom of the press is something new to the community. While acknowledging it will take time to include journalistic integrity in reporting news, the Somali journalist should strive to uphold the highest standards in media ethics. Despite the short comings we should celebrate what the Somali media has accomplished in a short period of time.

In the final analysis, in due time the audience will become mature journalistically, people will figure out their choices and some of the media that exist today will vanish due to their uselessness, like many before them. Others will mature; learn journalistic ethics and integrity, improving their reporting style, because their audience will demand it. By then we might have only a few viable, competitive media outlets which will serve their audience with news based on fine journalistic standards and not on emotion.

Finally if the following suggestions are followed, Somali media may see improvements in their reporting:

- Somali media must strive to uphold journalistic ethics of conduct
- The first loyalty must be reporting quality news
- There must be accountability and self discipline with personal ethics and moral-compass
- Integrity and self-respect to produce intelligent work is a must
- There must exist a discipline and verification system

- There must exist an independence between the people covering the news and those they cover
- News and editorials must be free from personal attacks and clan polarization
- A standard use of the Somali language must be used
- There must be a space for public criticism and debate
- The media must strive to make the news significant and relevant
- The media must create room for training and an ample learning curve
- Learn from media that have integrity and original content and if you must copy something copy their process and the reason they remain popular
- Create a network that fosters Somali media growth

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