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The role of the Internet in pathways to democratization: the case of Ethiopia

GPAC² PhD Programme – Abstract of Research Project

Kitaw Yayehyirad KITAW (Yayeh KITAW)

(kitaw@merit.unu.edu)

PhD Fellow in Governance and Policy Analysis

at the University of Maastricht – UNU-MERIT

Abstract

Scholarly studies examining the relationship between the use of the Internet and democracy all over the globe have failed to yield consistent and conclusive results. They focus predominately on use of the Internet by individuals and institutional structures of democratic governance, paying little attention how the Internet affects intermediate variables relating to public perception such as the degree of popular support for democracy in a polity. Moreover, Big Data available with the advent of Social Media Platforms and new fine-grained figures on Internet Filtering by authoritarian regimes remain unexplored through a global and empirical examination. The mechanisms underlying the relationship between the use of the Internet and democratization remain unclear. The present research focuses on these gaps, employing a quantitative examination of the extent to which the use of the internet has affected the level of popular support for democracy in polities, and, subsequently, democratization (or the lack thereof) on a global scale. The case study on Ethiopia will identify underlying mechanisms through which the growing use of the Internet and its restrictions affect an array of political outcomes, prodemocratic or otherwise. Causal pathways for two outcomes (authoritarian consolidation and democratization) will be examined through an exploratory qualitative case study using lines of evidence from Ethiopia. Consequences on sustainable development will be considered.

Keywords: ICT; Internet; democratic governance; democratization; Internet and democratic aspiration; Internet and democratization; Internet Filtering; Internet and authoritarian consolidation; authoritarian regimes; autocratic regimes; Internet and authoritarian regimes;

Discipline: Sustainable Development, Innovation and Societal Transitions; ICT-enabled Innovation and Societal Transformations; Innovation, Governance and Institutions;

About the PhD fellow

Kitaw works for the United Nations specialized agency for Information and Communication Technologies (ITU) in Geneva. In addition to his technical and policy-related experience in Information and Communication Technology, he is the founder of CyberEthiopia.com, a pioneering, award winning and impactful website that provided the first discussion forums using the Ethiopian Alphabet on the Internet ([Warka](#)) and this, in the early days of the World Wide Web when only images and latin characters could be posted online. Launched in 1996, CyberEthiopia was among the first websites [restricted from being accessed in Ethiopia](#) from May 2006 to June 2018 (12 years), [unblocked in 2018](#) when a new Prime Minister Dr Abiy arrived in office, announcing waves of reforms precluding the democratization of the nation, later winning the prestigious [Nobel Peace Prize in November 2019](#).

Combining his collected experience relating to the community website with those at the International Telecommunication Union, he aims to advance thinking and advocate practices so that innovation and technology advancements are informed by their social and human impacts when addressing developmental challenges.

Kitaw holds an MBA in Management of Technology from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL) and is currently [PhD Fellow](#) at the University of Maastricht - UNU-MERIT researching on the role of the Internet in pathways to democratization of authoritarian regimes.

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