Chapter 3
Selective Liberalization: An Analysis of Media Reform in an Emerging Democracy

Terje S. Skjerdal
NL A University College, Norway

ABSTRACT
This chapter discusses recent developments in Ethiopian media governance. The developments point in two directions: Formally speaking, media policy is liberalized, exemplified by improved media legislation, better access to public information, and issuing of private broadcasting licences. However, informally speaking, Ethiopian media governance shows signs of coercion. This is seen for example in increased government control with the official news agency, use of anti-terrorism legislation against journalists, and obstruction of political websites. The chapter suggests that the paradoxes in Ethiopian media governance may be explained as a case of selective liberalization, implying that liberalization is primarily found in areas where the risk of losing control with the flow of information is less for the government. Alongside selective liberalization, there is an undercurrent of unofficial policy in Ethiopia that may represent a return to informal coercion towards the media industry.

INTRODUCTION
There are, generally speaking, two competing accounts as regards current media reform on the African continent: one emphasizing a drive towards liberalization and the other emphasizing increased state control. Indeed, the latter appears to be the most foregrounded story concerning media democratization in Africa recently. Despite prescribed democratic progress, recent years have—in the view of many—been paved with disappointments. Promises of media liberalization have not been kept, newspapers have been forced to close down, airwaves remain largely under government control, and the average citizen has very limited access to the public arena. What I

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4197-6.ch003
intend to do in this contribution, nonetheless, is to discuss whether the apparently growing pessimism towards media policy in Africa is indeed a fair representation of long-term media reform on the continent. I will challenge this portrayal by suggesting that there is a need to distinguish between formal media policy, which is spelled out in laws and regulations, and media governance as a whole, which includes informal means of control as well (Puppis, 2010). Clearly, there are many examples of attempts at reintroducing restrictive clauses in African media regulation, but even so, I shall suggest that the long-term development in formal media policy still points towards liberalization and professionalization. However, the important lesson is that coercion remains a problem at informal level, and—perhaps—increasingly so. As formal regulation improves, media coercion assumes new forms and eventually threatens professional media activity. In theoretical terms, these developments in African media governance may be described as selective liberalization. Governments push liberalization in areas where the risk of losing control with communication is miniscule, but they retain control in areas where media communication could seriously challenge the power of the incumbent.

The concept of selective liberalization is exemplified by recent developments in media governance in the second-largest African country—Ethiopia. An emerging democracy on the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia broadly resembles other African nations in terms of media regulation and development. Like several other regimes on the continent, Ethiopia came out of an authoritarian situation and introduced multiparty democracy in the early 1990s. One of the first issues on the agenda for the new-born government was to allow private media outlets. In reality, however, the state retained control with the airwaves, and media pluralism was only allowed in the less important print media market. As the new private publications increasingly infuriated the Ethiopian government in the 1990s, the authorities began to use various types of restraints to control journalistic activity. However, as the present analysis will show, formal media policy in the country has simultaneously shown clear signs of improvement during the last two decades. The developments in Ethiopian media governance are, therefore, not unidirectional, but are subject to seemingly contradictory trajectories—as is the case for many other African nations. These contradictions in media governance will thus be explained within the framework of selective liberalization. Before turning to a closer analysis of the media situation in Ethiopia, it is therefore necessary to do an overview of the seemingly contradictory tendencies in African media policy over the past few decades.

DEVELOPMENTS TOWARDS LIBERALIZATION IN AFRICAN MEDIA POLICY

It is generally assumed that there is some sort of correlation between democratization and media liberalization, even though the relations are complex and unique to each national context. The paradox on the African continent, nonetheless, is that decolonization and national independence in the immediate decades after the 1950s did not bring with it larger media freedom—quite the contrary, actually, in many cases. The new African leaders—with hardly any exception—regarded the media as a convenient instrument for their political project. Kwame Nkrumah, the father of African nationalism, thus advocated a close partnership between political and journalistic forces when declaring that “our revolutionary African press must carry our revolutionary purposes” (cited in Bond, 1997, p. 30). To varying degrees, the media became mouthpieces of nationalism in the newly independent states. Many outlets, both private and official ones, began to censor themselves in order to tune in with official political ideas. They resembled “muffled drums” (Hachten, 1971) and the radio in particular became an instrument of political