

Book review

Idil Osman, *Media, diaspora and the Somali conflict*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer; London, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. ISBN 9783319577913; 156 pp. E book: 74,96 € ; Hardcover: 96,29 €.

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Media, Diaspora and the Somali Conflict is a reworked dissertation published by Palgrave Macmillan. The book provides important insights into the complex relation between diasporic populations and home, with a special focus on their use of and access to diverse forms of media. It shows how the rapidly growing significance of web-based journalism first became noticed during the coverage of the Kosovo war in 1999 and how this new form of reporting afforded members of the public in distant places an unprecedented degree of access and immediacy to breaking news in war zones. It also shows how the Internet empowered ordinary citizens to become citizen journalists.

A clear message that we should take from this book is that spaces of conflict that are harsh and inhumane and the conditions produced by the conflict should not be underestimated as they impact individuals and the way they act tremendously. The opening of the book provides us with a powerful illustration of this uncivilized society. When the author was in Mogadishu producing a television program as part of the United Nations (UN) sponsored anti-piracy media campaign, she lost an aunt during a bomb attack. She is confronted with the fact that burying people takes place almost immediately after the attack and without showing emotions. It has become common sense and nobody seems emotionally touched anymore. When Idil reads about the bomb attack online, she notices it is only facts that are left. Incidents like this illustrate Idil Osman's drive to report "stories." She wants to show the human stories behind the news facts, and she rightly does so in her book.

Idil Osman's book consists of eight chapters, starting with an introduction, a contextualization of the Somali conflict, and an overview of Somali migration history. The book takes the Somali Diaspora in the United Kingdom as a case study. There, they are the second largest, surpassed only by the Somali Diaspora in the United States. The United Kingdom

is also chosen for its demographic diversity which makes for a richer and more representative case study. The Somalis in the United Kingdom are divided into three distinct groups: (1) the seaman/steel workers during the colonial period, (2) the ones who have fled the 1991 civil war, and (3) the Somali Europeans moving to the United Kingdom seeking social tolerance and better economic opportunities. Idil Osman rightly categorizes the Somali diaspora as geographically abroad, but psychologically and emotionally they very much also reside in the homeland which illustrates the transnational component of the diaspora that is not either here or there but both here and both there.

Another clear message we can take from the book is that diaspora communities from conflict areas play an important role in the dynamics of the conflict, not only by investing money and knowledge but also by supporting certain dynamics that fuel the conflict. Diasporic media play important roles in this involvement. The concept of conflict re-creation, explained in Chapter 4, is central to Osman's argument. Idil Osman argues that diasporic media not only provide a transnational lifeline but may also perpetuate the dynamics of the conflict. As such, transnational media play an active role in the conflict and it can even re-create the conflict among the diaspora communities who then re-engage with the conflict, producing a cyclical progression of conflict of re-creation.

Idil Osman, who herself has worked as a journalist in Somalia for 12 years and is a participant observer in diaspora media, offers an original view on the role of Somali diaspora media in maintaining the link between those who have been displaced by 25 years of war and those who have remained or who are returned. Her own experience as a journalist and her critical inside analysis of the political situation in Somalia make this book very different from other studies on social media and Somalia. It is rough, provocative, and in your face, but it is most of all very real.

The book goes beyond claims that show how important transnational media are for Somali's diasporic identity formation. It examines how transnational media are influential but sometimes also destructive and can reinforce local tensions. Diasporic media are enabling diaspora members to reproduce local nationalism and transnationally maintained local identities. Like Benedikt Anderson was arguing already in 1992, mass communication has made long-distance nationalism much easier (Anderson, 1992).

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Chapter 5 of the book provides us with an excellent overview of existing Somali websites and television stations. It offers a content analysis and discourse analysis of 167 websites and 10 television stations. There is literature available on Somali media and Somali websites (Issa-Salwe, 2008), there is mapping of Somali media (Gaas, Hansen, & Berry, 2012), but there is no research on the role of media in this conflict. Diaspora individuals who are attracted to participate in Somali politics are considered very critically by the author. On page 74, Osman, for example, describes these actors as

half educated individuals who are outsiders or failures in the societies they have settled in. Their hunger for power and ambition render them unable to admit their inabilities to themselves making them complicit in the lack of political progress that is made in the country.

On the other hand it is also shown how diaspora politicians play a particular significant role in setting up media outlets as they are among the few with funding and technical expertise. Chapter 6 is about the role of journalists in the re-creation of the conflict and how editorial choices, often for financial reasons, also play a role.

Chapter 7 touches upon non-recognition and consumption of the news. Idil Osman's analysis throughout the book also shows how troubled spaces of diaspora and transnational communication can be and how Somali media outlets have given limited voice to marginalized groups.

Interview With Author

Ilse van Liempt: In your work you introduce the concept of “diasporated conflicts,” can you explain what you mean by this and could you illustrate how the recent attack in Mogadishu—an alleged Al Shabaab truck bombing that killed over 350 and wound over 400 people on 14 October 2017 (Burke, 2017)—is adding to the dynamics of the conflict?

Idil Osman: Diasporated conflicts are conflicts where diaspora communities that originate from the conflict territory have a hegemonic involvement in the dynamics and unfolding of the conflict, exercising human, social, and financial capital. This could take the form of “positive” involvement where diasporas are contributing skills, human resources, and finances towards improving humanitarian conditions, development projects, and general reconstruction efforts. But it could also take the form of regressive engagement where they support

dynamics that fuel the conflict by funding conflict activities and propagating existing fragmentation by supporting one group over another that are in opposition of each other. This involvement is principally enabled by diasporic media.

The Mogadishu terror attack is illustrative of terrorism being the main security challenge the country is facing right now. It illuminates the ideological split that continues to exist among the Somali political elite, but it also brings to the forefront the inadequacy of the Somali National Army and police force, which raises questions about the kind of training and support AMISOM (African Union Mission in Somalia) and the international community are providing. This ties in with my argument for the need to create a civilizing process in the Eliasian understanding of the phrase. The current approach of international community and Somali government with regard to tackling insecurity has a heavy technical focus but barely focuses on the “civilizing” aspects that societies recovering from conflict require, such as establishing a vested interest between the public and the state and government monopoly over instruments of violence. Evidence coming out of Mogadishu indicates that the attacker was able to get through many checkpoints before detonating, through either bribery or affiliation with some of the soldiers manning the checkpoints. In other words, a public-wide acceptance of government rule of law has not been established yet, and until we have this “civilized” connection between the state, its institutions, and the public, we will unfortunately continue to see atrocities like the 14 October attack in the future.

Ilse van Liempt: What exactly is the role of European Union (EU) Somalis in the covering of news from Somalia? Is it like with politics that there is an overrepresentation of diasporic Somalis involved in the production of news? And which topics/groups/clans are underrepresented because of this?

Idil Osman: The concept of diasporated conflicts speaks exactly to this diaspora dominance. The media that dominate the Somali media landscape both in quantity and in quality are diaspora-owned and run as well as most reporters are from the diaspora. They focus on and engage the “big players,” and unfortunately, in the Somali context, this means that minority clan members, young people, women, the disabled, and the less fortunate tend to be underrepresented in media coverage.

- Ilse van Liempt:* Your theoretical part relies heavily on the work of Norbert Elias, why did you decide to work with this framework? When did you first come across this work and what made you think it fits the case of Somalia, diaspora, and media?
- Idil Osman:* I came across Elias' work while researching sociological approaches towards media and conflict. I was quite mindful to stay away from Africa-centered concepts and case studies as conflict is a human struggle and not limited to the African experience. I did not think the political economy approach had much purchase beyond the Western sphere. I was attracted to his concept as it clearly demonstrated the universal condition of human existence which has both civilizing and decaying ingredients. Anderson made the media connection in relation to society in "Imagined Communities," which is why I also borrow from him.
- Ilse van Liempt:* Chapter 5 of your book is an excellent overview of existing Somali websites and television stations and it is based on a content and discourse analysis of 167 websites and 10 television stations. This elaborated study on Somalia has provided us with new insights into how social media work. According to you, what is the most important contribution of this analysis for the way we study social media more generally?
- Idil Osman:* The most important contribution I make in my book is that media play a performative, enabling role which can have democratic appeal. However, in a conflict context, this can take a regressive turn. The media can become conflict tools that re-create conflicts many thousands of miles away, so this would put us, as scholars of media, in a position where we ought to pay much closer attention to the roles of diaspora media that fall outside the common parameters of maintaining cultural identities and ties of kinship.
- Ilse van Liempt:* I remember from my own fieldwork with Somalis in London that radio was a very important news outlet, especially for older men. Is this still strong, or is it changing?
- Idil Osman:* Radio is still the main means of receiving information in Somalia due to the high illiteracy rates and the familiarity of the medium being oral, which connects with the long-standing tradition of Somali oral culture. Internet penetration in Somalia is still low at 2%–3%, but it is growing. Radio culture is also changing due to the diaspora investing and enabling telecommunication services, which in turn facilitates access to Somali diasporic media and global media. There is, for example, an increase in television use showing Turkish, Arab, and Bollywood films and channels.
- Ilse van Liempt:* I was intrigued by your comment on how social media have empowered ordinary citizens to become amateur reporters. Can you give an example of a good amateur reporter covering issues in Somalia today, and how does it differ from mainstream reporting? Are there also examples of female reporters?
- Idil Osman:* Most of the practitioners of mainstream Somali media are amateur reporters in the sense that most have not acquired professional training or education beyond secondary school. They also operate in unregulated spaces which does not facilitate a sense of accountability. This lack of professionalism is what leads to much of media coverage becoming embroiled in the conflict. This is different for the younger generation, both those in the Somali territories and the diaspora. They seem to be more interested in civic engagement, and their social media content indicates a sense of duty to show the "positive" side of Somalia. One such example is Zahra Qoranne, an amateur photographer who adds small anecdotes to her social media snapshots of Somali beaches, beautiful mountains/landscape, countryside, and so on, which challenge the narrative of Somalia being war-torn and a terrorist haven (<https://www.instagram.com/zahraqoranne/?hl=en>). Coincidentally, she is a female and representative of young women in Somalia who are challenging male dominance. But there is still a very long way to go. The second

book I'm working on now, *New Media, Activism and the Somali Youth*, is further exploring this idea.

Ilse van Liempt: I am already looking forward to reading that new book!

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