

How the Ethiopian diaspora community spearheaded the Hashtag Activism after the assassination of Huchela Hundessa



Code for Africa

08 2020

CODE for AFRICA

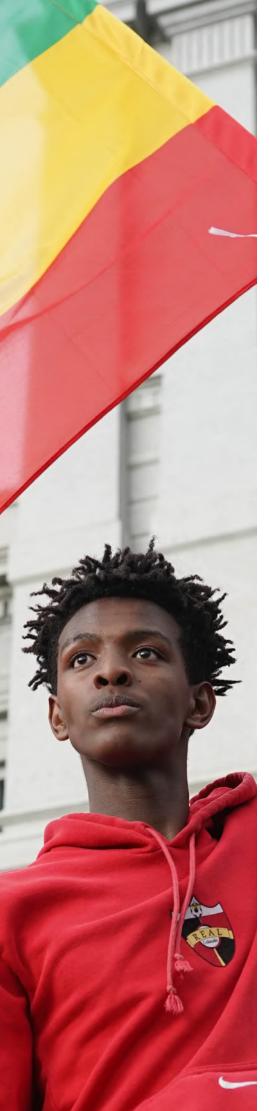


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The Authors

<u>Code for Africa (CfA)</u> is the continent's largest network of non-profit independent civic technology and open data laboratories, with teams of full-time technologists and analysts in 15 African countries. CfA's laboratories build digital democracy solutions that give citizens unfettered access to actionable information to improve citizens' ability to make informed decisions, and to strengthen civic engagement for improved public governance and accountability.

The <u>African Network of Centres for Investigative Reporting (ANCIR)</u> is a CfA initiative that brings together the continent's best investigative newsrooms, ranging from large traditional mainstream media to smaller specialist units. ANCIR member newsrooms investigate crooked politicians, organised crime and big business. The iLAB is ANCIR's in-house digital forensic team of data scientists and investigative specialists who spearhead investigations that individual newsrooms are unable to tackle on their own. This includes forensic analysis of suspected digital disinformation campaigns aimed at misleading citizens, or triggering social discord or polarisation using hate speech, radicalisation or other techniques.

The iLAB subscribes to CfA's guiding principles:

- We show what's possible. Digital democracy can be expensive. We seek to be a catalyst by lowering the political risk of experimentation by creating successful proof-of-concept for liberating civic data, for building enabling technologies and for pioneering sustainable revenue models. We also seek to lower the financial costs for technology experimentation by creating and managing shared backbone civic technology, and by availing resources for rapid innovation.
- We empower citizens. Empowering citizens is central to our mission. Strong democracies rely on engaged citizens who have actionable information and easy-to-use channels for making their will known. We therefore work primarily with citizen organisations and civic watchdogs, including the media. We also support government and social enterprises to develop their capacity to meaningfully respond to citizens and to effectively collaborate with citizens.
- We are action oriented. African societies are asymmetric. The balance of power rests with governments and corporate institutions, at the expense of citizens. Citizens are treated as passive recipients of consultation or services. We seek to change this by focusing on actionable data and action-orientated tools that give agency to citizens.
- We operate in public. We promote openness in our work and in the work of our partners. All of our digital tools are open source and all our information is open data. We actively encourage documentation, sharing, collaboration, and reuse of both our own tools, pro-



grammes, and processes, as well as those of partners.

• We help build ecosystems. We actively marshal resources to support the growth of a pan-African ecosystem of civic technologists. Whenever possible we reuse existing tools, standards and platforms, encouraging integration and extension. We operate as a pan-African federation of organisations who are active members of a global community, leveraging each other's knowledge and resources, because all of our work is better if we are all connected.

This report was authored by the iLAB's East African team, consisting of investigative manager Allan Cheboi, data analyst Jean Githae and data technologist Robin Kiplangat. Some of the data relevant for the analysis was provided by our partner at DFRLab, Tessa Knight. The report was edited by senior programme manager Amanda Strydom and deputy CEO Chris Roper, and approved for publication by CEO Justin Arenstein.

Glossary

Detailed descriptions and explanations of terms and abbreviations relevant to this report are listed below. These descriptions and explanations serve to clarify the usage in our report and are not intended to to be authoritative.

Abbreviation	Description
ANCIR	African Network of Centres for Investigative Reporting
API	Application Programming Interface
CfA	Code for Africa
CIB	Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour ¹
COST	Cost of Shutdown Tool
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
OMN	Oromia Media Network
PM	Prime Minister
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

1 <u>Definition of terms</u>



The context

According to an article on <u>Al Jazeera</u>, at least 166 people have died during violent demonstrations that roiled Ethiopia in the days following the murder of popular singer Haacaaluu Hundeessa on Monday, 29 June 2020. Haacaaluu, a member of the Oromo ethnic group, Ethiopia's largest, was shot dead by unknown attackers in Addis Ababa, heightening ethnic tensions and threatening the country's democratic transition.

Haacaaluu's music gave voice to Oromos' widespread sense of economic and political marginalisation during years of anti-government protests that swept Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power in 2018. Abiy said Haacaaluu's killing and the subsequent violence represented "<u>coordinated attempts</u>" to destabilise the country.

According to the <u>Guardian</u>, protests after Haacaaluu's murder tapped into grievances fuelled by decades of government repression, and what the Oromo describe as their historical exclusion from political power.

CfA sought to understand the impact of the protests on social media platforms and identify any cases of coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB), external influence or disinformation practices.



Ethiopia's hashtag activism: How the Ethiopian diaspora community spearheaded the Hashtag Activism after the assassination of Haacaaluu Hundessa

By Code for Africa

Executive Summary

Hacktivism, the word used to describe online activism, takes many forms, from symbolic signalling of one's stance on a politicised issue (e.g. changing one's social media profile picture) to more complex engagement (e.g. writing detailed posts about a social issue). These activities pose a minimal cost to participants.

Amid renewed protests in Ethiopia, web brigades composed of user accounts of Oromo tribal descent waged an online campaign to protest historical injustices and exclusion from the government's development efforts in the country. The latest clashes, which erupted on 29 June 2020, had led to the death of at least <u>178</u> people as at 13 August 2020.

CfA analysed several Twitter hashtags related to the protests. First, we examined the volume of tweets using the #OromoProtests hashtag, as well as other hashtags related to the protests such as #AbiyMustGo and #hacaaluuhundeessaa.

The #OromoProtests hashtag has had a relatively consistent presence on Twitter for the last seven years, with periodic increases in usage around key events. The #OromoProtests hashtag first appeared on Twitter on 18 June 2013 after Oromo refugees in Egypt camped outside the UNHCR regional office for over two weeks, demanding physical protection amid anti-Ethiopia backlash over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project <u>stalemate</u>.

From the data collected from 18 June 2013 through July 2020, we noted that the hashtag has been used nearly 214,833 times on Twitter. Although the hashtag was slow to gain prominence, there have been periodic increases in its daily usage in response to real-world events – most notably protests organised in 2014, 2016 and the most recent one in 2020.

In April 2014, we observed an increase in the use of the hashtag which is attributed to the violence at a number of university campuses across Oromia State, as ethnic Oromo students protested a master plan by the central government of Ethiopia to expand the capital, Addis Ababa, into parts of Oromia. This was followed by protests against the planned implementation of the master plan between December 2015 and May 2016.



In August 2016, fresh protests erupted after the opposition groups demanded social and political reforms including an end to human rights abuses such as government killings of civilians, mass arrests, government land seizures, and political marginalisation of opposition and ethnic groups.

The final spike observed on 29 June 2020 was as a result of the assassination of musician Haacaaluu Hundeessa. The government shut down the internet for23 days. Within this period, the interaction observed was mainly spearheaded by social media users in the diaspora.

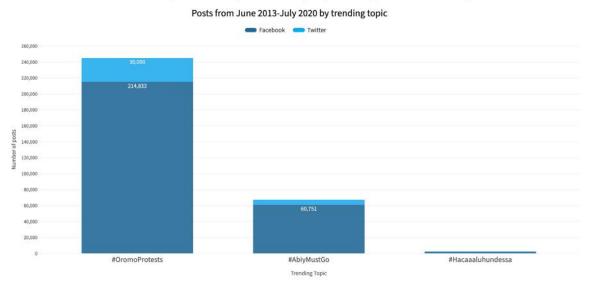
CfA further observed the coordination of users participating in the protest by use of lead websites with pre-drafted tweets, coordinated link sharing, creation of new accounts and use of automation to share the narratives within the hashtags. We further identified cases where users re-shared old protests and genocide pictures falsifying them as evidence of current protests with the intention of potentially polarising or inciting reaction from the public.



The network

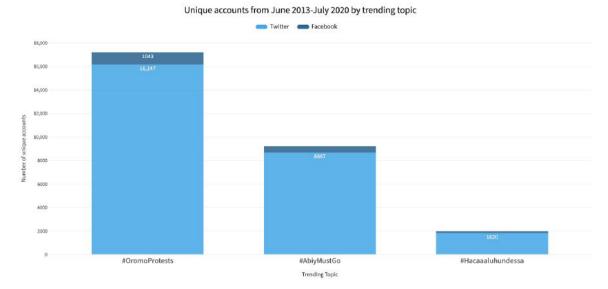
Using twint, CfA collected and analysed a total of 214,833 tweets posted by 16,147 unique accounts using the hashtag #OromoProtests, 60,751 tweets posted by 8,667 unique accounts using the hashtag #AbiyMustGo and 6,075 tweets posted by 1,820 unique accounts using the hashtag #Hacaaaluhundessa from Twitter.

Using CrowdTangle, CfA collected and analysed a total of 30,000 Facebook posts from 1,043 unique pages and groups using the hashtag #OromoProtests, 6,331 Facebook posts from 542 unique pages and groups using the hashtag #AbiyMustGo, and 381 Facebook posts from 148 unique pages and groups using the hashtag #Hacaaaluhundessa from Facebook.



Social media posts in response to major political protests in Ethiopia

Social media accounts participating in online discussions on major political protests in Ethiopia



Data collected for analysis from Facebook and Twitter (Source:<u>CfA</u>)



Historical mapping of hashtag activism

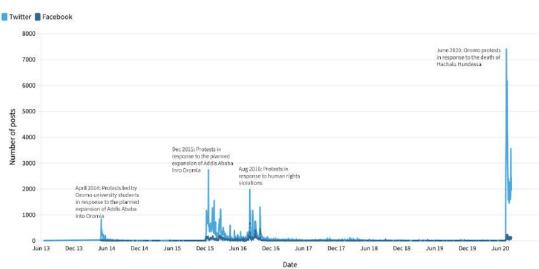
July 2020 marks the seventh anniversary of the #OromoProtests hashtag, which was first coined following the violence observed against the Oromo refugees in Egypt. The affected communities camped outside the UNHCR regional office for over two weeks demanding physical protection amid anti-Ethiopia backlash over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project stalemate.

1000	tQassim ∽ ⊳vinha56
	of #oromoprotests in front of UNHCR asking for n and no more discrimination. #oromo
#refugee	un 18, 2013 · Twitter Web Client
#refugee	es #Egypt #Ethiopia un 18, 2013 - Twitter Web Client

The <u>tweet</u> posted on 18 June 2013, by user <u>@Novinha56</u> initiated a long-term usage of the hashtag for key political protests in the following years.

In the course of those seven years, #OromoProtests has become a go-to online keyword used in modern protests and political engagement in Ethiopia and by members of the Ethiopian diaspora communities.

CfA's analysis of public tweets finds the hashtag has been used nearly 214,833 times on Twitter and 30,000 times on Facebook..



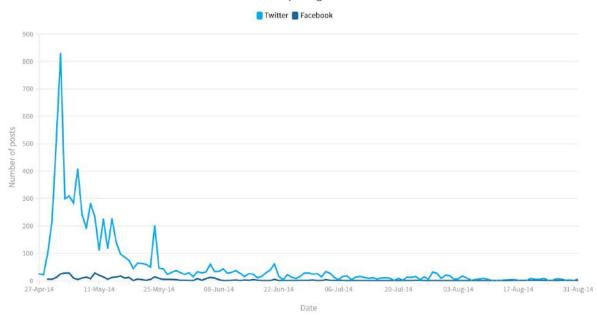
Use of the #OromoProtests on social media showing spikes in response to major political protests
Posts from June 2013-July 2020

Use of the #OromoProtests on Twitter showing spikes in response to major political protests (Source: Twitter/CfA)



2014 Oromo protests

The spike observed in April 2014 is as a result of online hashtag activism in response to the <u>vio-lence</u> that erupted in a number of university campuses across Owromia State as ethnic Oromo students protested a plan by the central government of Ethiopia to expand the capital, Addis Ababa, into parts of Oromia.





Number of public posts using the hashtag #Oromoprotests between 27 April 2014 and 31 Aug 2014 (Source: Twitter/ CfA)

According to <u>The Advocates for Human Rights</u>, on 25 April 2014, students began protesting after the Ethiopian government announced a master plan to expand the territory of Addis Ababa. The plan would, in effect, annex thousands of hectares of Oromia's fertile agricultural land. Oromo students sounded the alarm about the plan, recognising that it would displace Oromo farmers and leave them without a livelihood or access to their traditional lands.



109 Retweets and comments 40 Likes

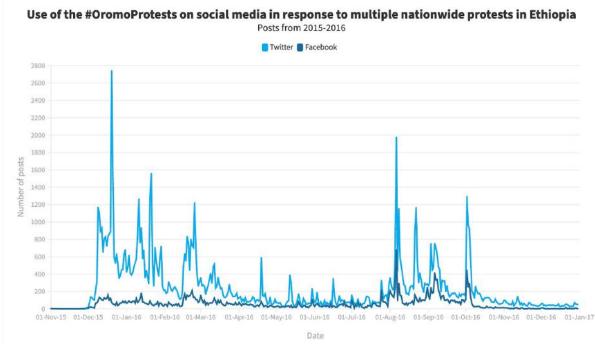
CfA observed that tweets with the #Oromoprotests that had the highest interaction rates were mainly posted by international/local journalists and media houses reporting on the situation in Ethiopia. The protests escalated after six members of a group known as the "Zone9" bloggers – Befekadu Hailu, Atnaf Berahane, Natnael Feleke, Mahlet Fantahun, Zelalem Kibret, and Abel Wabela² – were arrested at their offices and in the streets.

² Abel Wabella currently works as a fact checker with PesaCheck, a project incubated by CfA.



2015 - 2016 Oromo protests

The notable spikes observed in December 2015 were as a result of protests against the planned implementation of the Master plan announced in April 2014. According to <u>Human Rights</u> <u>Watch</u>, protests by students began in Ginchi, a small town 80 kilometers southwest of Addis Ababa, when authorities sought to clear a forest for an investment project. Protests quickly spread throughout the Oromia region, home of Ethiopia's estimated 35 million Oromo.



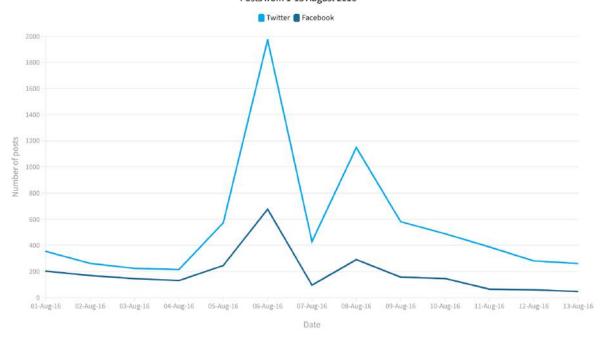
Number of tweets using the hashtag #Oromoprotests between 1 Nov 2015 and 1 Jan 2017 (Source: Twitter/ CfA)

Subsequent spikes observed around August 2016 were as a <u>result</u> of nationwide protests which erupted on 5 August 2016 following calls by opposition groups demanding social and political reforms, including an end to human rights abuses such as government killings of civilians, mass arrests, government land seizures, and political marginalisation of opposition and ethnic groups.

Internet shutdown in 2016

Notably, a drop in the social media interactions observed between 6 August 2016 and 8 August 2016 was attributed to the internet shutdown when the government ordered the only mobile carrier in the country, Ethio-telecom to restrict internet access for a period of two days.

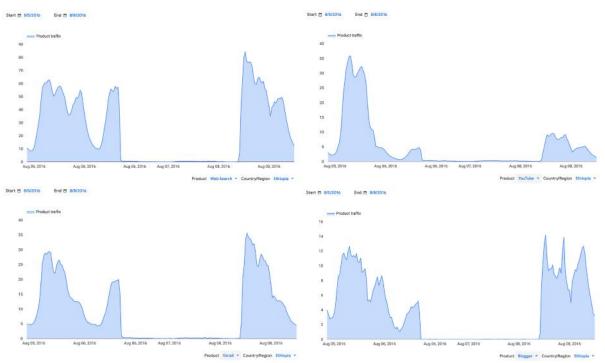




Use of the #OromoProtests on social media during the 2016 internet shutdown in Ethiopia Posts from 1-13 August 2016

Number of posts using the hashtag #Oromoprotests between 6 Aug 2016 and 8 Aug 2016 (Source: CfA)

This is corroborated by the levels of <u>interaction observed</u> on Google platforms such as Google Search, YouTube, Blogger and Gmail from 6 - 8 August 2016.

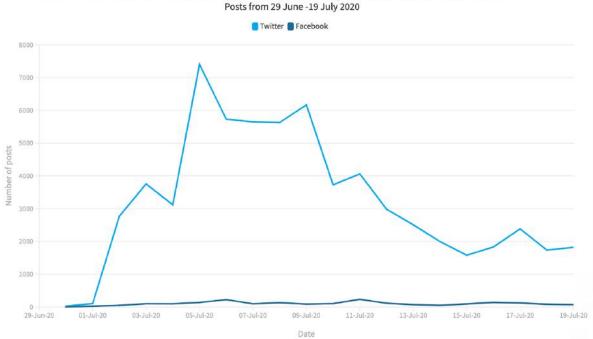


Levels of interactions observed on Google platforms between 6 Aug 2016 and 8 Aug 2016 (Source: CfA)



2020 Oromo protests

Haacaaluu, aged 34, was killed at 9AM on 29 June 2020, sparking unrest that spread from Oromia where he was perceived a hero. We observed a sharp increase in the number of tweets using the hashtag #OromoProtests from 30 June 2020.



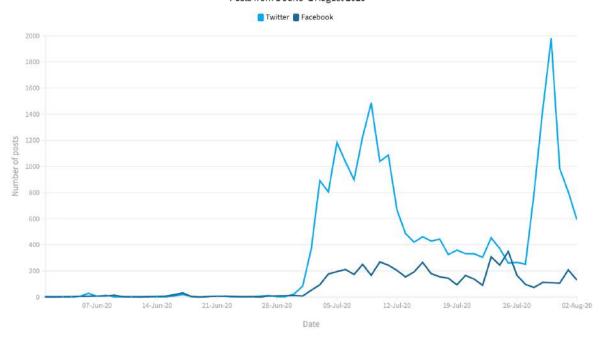
Use of the #OromoProtests on social media following the death of Haacaaluu Hundeessa Posts from 29 June -19 July 2020

Use of the #OromoProtests showing spikes from 1 June 2020 to 19 July 2020 (Source: Twitter/CfA)

Use of multiple hashtags

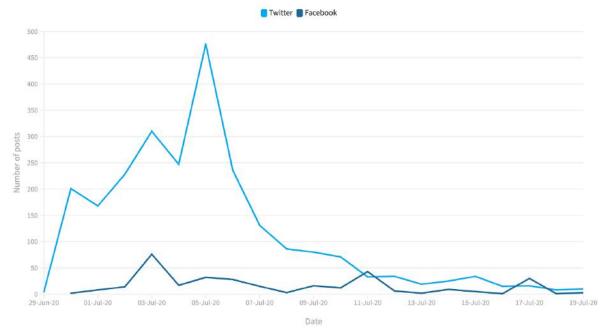
The conversations surrounding the #OromoProtests hashtag often centered on issues related to oppression, marginalisation and police brutality against the Oromo community over the seven-year period as seen in the historical mapping section of the report. During the July 2020 protests, we observed a couple of associated hashtags #AbiyMustGo and #hacaaluuhundeessaa on both Twitter and Facebook . #AbiyMustGo had been used sporadically in a number of tweets before the July protests, however the most notable spike was first observed on 29 June 2020, the day Haacaaluu was assassinated. The first tweet using the hashtag #hacaaluuhundeessaa was also posted on 29 June 2020.





Use of the #AbiyMustGo on social media following the death of Haacaaluu Hundeessa Posts from 1 June -2 August 2020

Number of posts using the hashtag #AbiyMustGo between 01 Jun 2020 and 02 Aug 2020 (Source: Twitter/ CfA)



Use of the #hacaaluuhundeesaa on social media following the death of Haacaaluu Hundeessa Posts from 29 June -19 July 2020

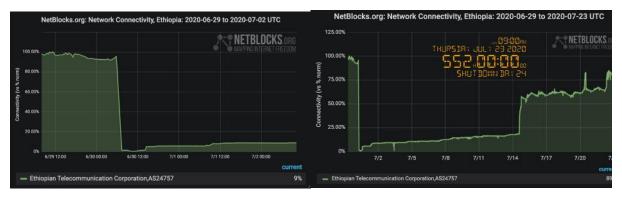
Number of posts using the hashtag #Hacaaluhundessaa between 01 Jun 2020 and 02 Aug 2020 (Source:Twitter/ CfA)



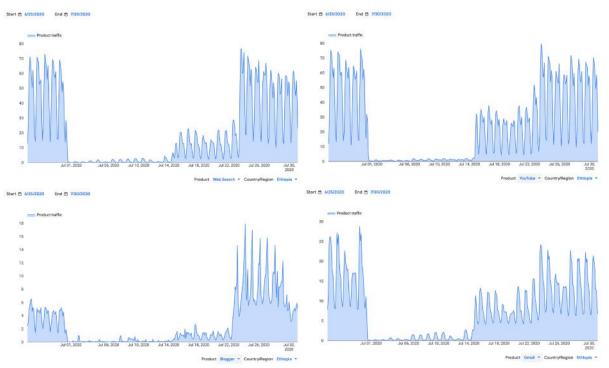
Internet shutdown in 2020

Duration of internet shutdown

CfA noted that there was a 14 day-internet shutdown experienced in Ethiopia between 30 June 2020 and 14 July 2020. NetBlocks, a civil society group working at the intersection of digital rights, cyber-security and internet governance, maps internet connectivity of each country on a daily basis. According to a report published on their <u>website</u>, network data from the NetBlocks internet observatory confirmed that internet access had been cut across most of Ethiopia from just after 9 a.m. local time (6:00 a.m. UTC) on Tuesday 30 June 2020 amid protests and unrest.



Network data showing internet accessibility in Ethiopia from 30 June 2020 to 23 July 2020 (Source: Netblocks/CfA) According to the Netblocks report, real-time metrics showed that the country remained largely offline until the morning of 23 July 2020, with nation-scale impact that lasted 23 whole days. This is also corroborated by the levels of interaction observed on Google platforms such as Google Search, YouTube, Blogger and Gmail from 30 June 2020 to 23 July 2020.

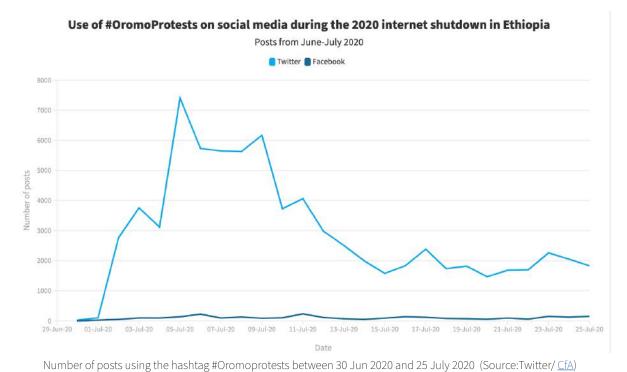


Levels of interactions observed on Google platforms between 30 June 2020 and 23 July 2020 (Source: CfA)



Anomaly in social media interactions

CfA noted that instead of a drop, there was a spike in the number of posts using the #Oromo-Protests for Twitter interactions observed between 30 June 2020 and 14 July 2020. However, there was no significant change in the number of Facebook posts using the hashtag within the same duration of time.



The spike observed on Twitter posts gave an indication that major social media interactions in relation to the protests were not originating from within Ethiopia's borders, but externally from the diaspora and international community. This is further confirmed by the level of interactions between the two social media platforms. According to Ethiopia's internet use statistics from <u>Statcounter</u>, Facebook ranked higher in terms of usage inside Ethiopia's borders as compared to Twitter, therefore, the not so significant change in number of Facebook posts observed above can be attributed to the internet shutdown experienced in the country.





The detailed social media influence from the diaspora community is discussed in the next section of this report.

Impacts of internet shutdowns

Internet access has become inextricably intertwined with the ability to engage in political participation. Government-mandated disruptions of Internet access are driven largely by political and national security concerns.

Internet shutdowns have far-reaching consequences including technical, economic, and human rights impacts.

Technical impact

In the technical context, while an internet shutdown in the hosting country is focused on disrupting access in that country, it ultimately blocks access to services and applications from the rest of the global internet - cutting off critical interpersonal communication, financial transactions, and enterprise workflows.



Economic impact

Internet shutdowns have a huge economic impact because businesses suffer immensely when they cannot communicate. According to Brookings, a big thinktank, internet shutdowns all over the world cost \$2.4 billion in 2015-2016. According to <u>Netblocks' cost of shutdown tool</u>, the total cost of the 23-day internet shutdown in Ethiopia amounted to a total economic impact of US\$102,544,852.

		ta blackout or a	pp restriction	estimates the economic impact of an internet on using indicators from the World Bank, ITU J.S. Census.
		NETE MAPPING	BLOCKS.ORG	Internet Society
Affected country	or re	egion		\$100 = ((0 = 0)
Ethiopia			× 1	\$102,544,852
Whole country			~	TOTAL COST IMPACT
The regions affect (not available)				ETB 3,007,867,759 ETHIOPIAN BIRR
Services blocker partial shutdowr		ered or throttled	In	ETHIOT MIX BIRK
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Human rights impact

Open, secure and reliable connectivity is essential for rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of association. Internet disconnections can mean that governments are disconnecting citizens from the ability to politically engage. In recent times, it is notable that one of the primary steps taken to disperse protests that are being published online is to order internet service providers (ISPs) to shut down all international connections before they lead to physical demonstrations. One perspective is that internet disconnections are the cyber equivalent to employing crowd dispersal devices such as smoke grenades, teargas canisters, or use of rubber bullets.

It can be argued that internet access cannot be distinguished from the exercise of freedom of expression and opinion and the right to peaceful assembly or association. As <u>stated and</u> <u>reaffirmed</u> by the UN Human Rights Council on 29 June 2012, governments should protect and respect these rights whether in online or offline contexts. As such, internet shutdowns, in particular those that disable all means of communications, should be considered as potential human rights violations.

While rights such as free speech are not absolute and can be restricted on exceptional grounds – such as national security and public order – they also need to follow the three-part test laid out in <u>Article 19 paragraph 3</u> of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).



The network

As observed above, the protests/ demonstrators used social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to report the violence and progress of the protests, with a significant portion of the coverage coming from the diaspora and international communities especially during the internet shutdown period.

Diaspora community influence

The Ethiopian diaspora newsrooms and communities in foreign countries use social media to great effect in shaping coverage of events back home, especially the protest movement that has pummeled Ethiopia for more than six years. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have proved to be a double-edged sword in Ethiopia. This is attributed to their capability of filling a need for more information due to limited press freedom, and frequent internet shutdowns during periods of political unrest.

Facebook activity

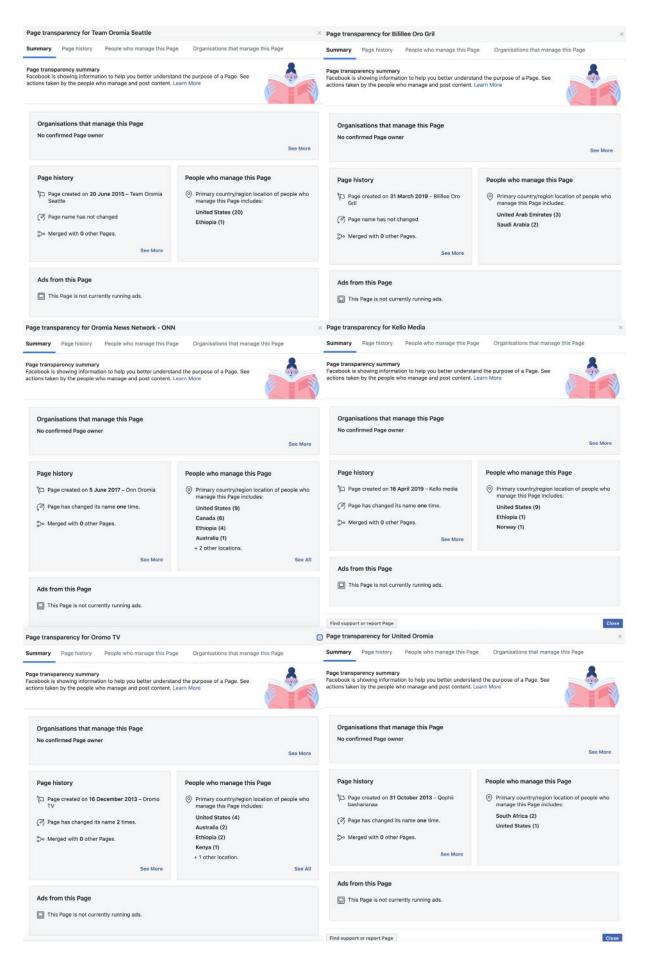
CfA observed that the posts with the highest interaction rates on Facebook originated from accounts, pages and groups mainly administered by individuals located in diaspora countries such as the United States, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Canada, Norway, Kenya, Egypt, Australia. A few of the groups had administrators in Ethiopia with the highest having four administrators based in Ethiopia.

	1 10 0	· · ·	U		
	Page name	Highest post comments	Highest post likes	Highest post shares	Total page likes
1	Team Oromia Seattle	5,953	3,059	24,469	64,210
2	FinfinneeTube	4,822	4	0	26,742
3	Bilillee Oro Gril	4,033	1,423	6,512	35,672
4	Kello Media	3,270	1,495	23,698	64,609
5	Oromia Media Network	2,949	2,397	1,950	1,160,503
6	Oromia News Network - ONN	2,807	2,202	10,868	185,005
7	Oromo TV	2,621	159	6,484	178,579
8	Henok G. Gabisa	2,105	405	40,936	109,658
9	Abdi Teyib Wako	1,487	505	27,935	57,175
10	BBS: Bultum Broadcasting Service	1,366	362	4,438	81,525

Top 10 Facebook pages and groups with the highest interactions on posts in 2020

Table showing Facebook pages and groups with the highest post interaction rates in 2020. (Source:Facebook/CfA)







age transparency for OromoProtests	1	Page transparency for BBS: Bultum Broadcasting S	ervices
ummary Page history People who manage this Page	ge Organisations that manage this Page	Summary Page history People who manage this Pa	ge Organisations that manage this Page
age transparency summary acebook is showing information to help you better understa clions taken by the people who manage and post content.		Page transparency summary Facebook is showing information to help you better underst actions taken by the people who manage and post content.	
Organisations that manage this Page No confirmed Page owner	See More	Organisations that manage this Page Confirmed Page owner: BROADCASTERS, INC SAINT PAUL, MN 55106 United States of America +16517748731 @	
Page history	People who manage this Page		See More
D Page created on 2 May 2014 - Oromoprotests D Page has changed its name one time. N Merged with 0 other Pages. See More	 Primary country/region location of people who manage this Page includes: Australia (2) United States (2) 	Page history 입그 Page created on 26 March 2019 - Bultum Broadcasting Services (경) Page has changed its name one time.	People who manage this Page Primary country/region location of people who manage this Page includes: Canada (4) Egypt (3)
Ads from this Page This Page is not currently running ads.		⊘∘ Merged with 0 other Pages. See More	United States (3)
		Ads from this Page	
ind support or report Page	Close	This Page is not currently running ads.	

Screengrabs showing page transparency information for administrator locations (Source: Facebook/CfA)

Twitter activity

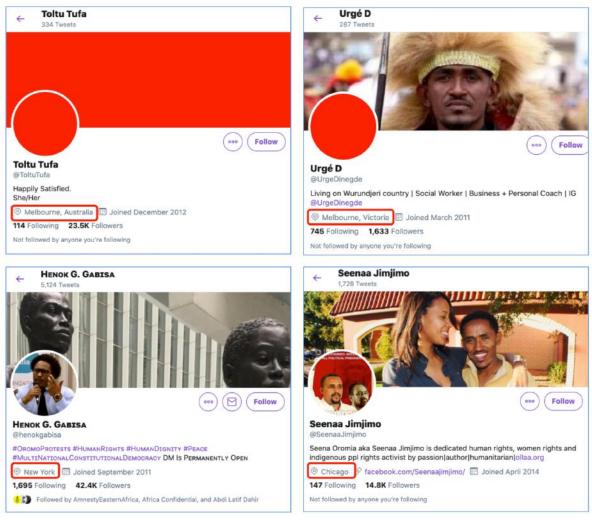
On Twitter, CfA noted that the accounts with the highest interaction rates using the #oromoprotests also belonged to individuals in the diaspora.

Top 10 Twitter accounts with the highest interactions on individual tweets in 2020

	Username	Location on bio	Total engagement for the best performing tweet	Total number of followers
1	toltutufa	Australia	1765	23.5K
2	urgedinegde	Australia	1479	1.6K
3	henokgabisa	United States	978	42.4K
4	kullee_j	Oromia	700	10.1K
5	seenaajimjimo	United States	431	14.8K
6	curatethiopia	N/A	200	7.7K
7	nuroromo	United States	199	1.3K
8	adamomargitu	Not indicated	198	1.2K
9	gallane_gudata	Not indicated	183	108
10	indyjay7	Not Indicated	178	390

Table showing Twitter accounts with the highest tweet interaction rates in 2020. (Source: Twitter/ CfA)

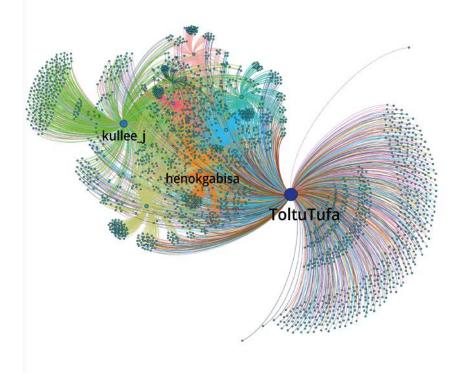




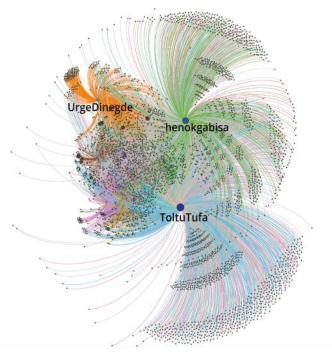
Screen grabs showing profile location of top 10 twitter accounts which posted tweets with the highest interaction rates (Source: Twitter/ \underline{CfA})

We used gephi, a visualization tool, to create a network graph and show the relationships between the accounts within the network. We noted that for both hashtags, the new accounts were retweeting from a select pool of highly influential diaspora accounts. It is worth noting that the highly influential accounts such as @toltutufa and @henokgabisa were leading calls for the release of arrested opposition leaders and condemning Haacaaluu's murder. Most of the accounts that retweeted the posts from such influential profiles were recently created accounts and suspected bot accounts as discussed in subsequent sections of this report.





Network graph showing level of retweets for posts using #OromoProtests (Source: Twitter/ CfA)



Network graph showing level of retweets for posts using #AbiyMustGo (Source: Twiter/ CfA)

Toltu Tufa, an Australian-born Oromo woman, had the most retweeted posts on the network. She is the author of Oromo books for children and an outspoken advocate for the Oromo people.



Protests websites

CfA further identified two websites linked to the social media posts on both Facebook and Twitter used to spearhead the Oromo protests. The websites were registered in the United States.

https://oromoprotests.org/ archive and https://justice4hachalu.org/get-involved/ were used to propagate the intended statements under the #Oromoprotests, #AbiyMustGo and #Ha-caaluhundessa hashtags. The websites had pre-drafted tweets with links to enable visitors of the websites to directly tweet from the websites on a click of a button.

A close inspection of the registration information for the two websites revealed that they were registered in the United States and Panama. However, the websites do not provide ownership details.

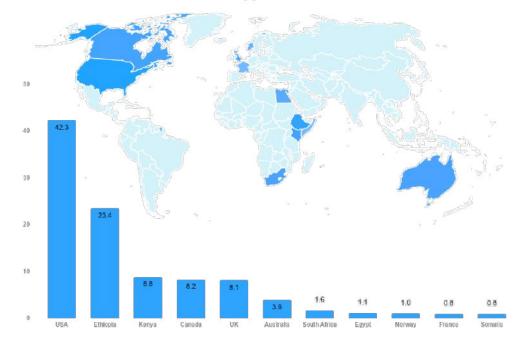
Whois Record (last updated on 2020-08-06)	Whois Record (last updated on 2020-08-06)
Domain Name; GRONOPROTISTS.ORG Registry Domain ID: D40220000001409933-LROR Registry MOIS Server: Whois godaddy.com Updated Date: J020-07-J0723:41:501 Creation Date: J020-07-J0723:41:501 Creation Date: J020-07-J0723:52:531 Registry Explyr Date: J021-07-J1270:52:535 Registry Explyr Date: J021-07-J1270:52:535 Registry Explyr Date: J021-07-J1270:52:535 Registrar Abuse Contact Enail: sbue@podady.com Registrar Abuse Contact Enail: sbue@podady.com Domain Statum: ClientOpleteProhibited https://icann.org/eppfelientDeleteProhibited Domain Statum: ClientUpdateProhibited https://icann.org/eppfelientTensferProhibited Domain Statum: clientUpdateProhibited https://icann.org/eppfelientTensferProhibited Domain Statum: clientUpdateProhibited https://icann.org/eppfelientTensferProhibited d Domain Statum: clientUpdateProhibited https://icann.org/eppfelientTensferProhibited d Registrant State/Frechibited https://icann.org/eppfelientTensferProhibited Registrant Country: US Rese Server: SE01.00AAINCONTROL.COM Hame Server: SE01.00AAINCONTROL.COM Hame Server: SE01.00AAINCONTROL.COM	Domain Name: JUSTICE4HACHALU.ORG Registry Domain ID: D40220090013989716-LROR Registrar WHOIS Server: whois.namecheap.com Updated Date: 2020-06-30701156:132 Creation Date: 2020-06-30701136:132 Registrar Registration Expiration Date: Registrar Namecheap, Inc. Registrar Namecheap, Inc. Registrar Abuse Contact Email: abuse@namecheap.com Registrar Abuse Contact Email: abuse@namecheap.com Registrar Abuse Contact Phone: +1.6613102107 Reseller: Domain Status: serverTransferProhibited https://icann.org/epp#serverTrans d Registrant State/Province: Panama Registrant State/Province: Panama Registrant Country: PA Name Server: NS1224.WEBSITEWELCOME.COM Name Server: NS1234.WEBSITEWELCOME.COM DNSSEC: unsigned URL of the ICANN Whois Inaccuracy Complaint Form https://www.icann.org/vi
For more information on Whois status codes, please visit https://icann.org/epp	For more information on Whois status codes, please visit https://icann.or

Whois lookup information for oromoprotests.org and justice4hachalu.org. (Source: DomainTools/ CfA)



Geo-location tagged Twitter profiles

Given the persistence of these accounts during the internet shutdown, it is hypothesized that a significant proportion of these accounts belonged to users outside Ethiopia. CfA analysed all the geo-location enabled profiles that posted tweets under #OromoProtests and #AbiyMust-Go and noted that the majority of the accounts were located in the diaspora, especially in the United States of America. It is important to note that only 1,673 unique accounts (representing 6.7%) had identifiable geo-location tag on their profiles.



Geo-Tagged Profiles

We noted that individuals in Kenya also contributed a significant portion of the social media interactions using the hashtags under investigation. This is attributed to the alleged arrest of a prominent Kenyan journalist, Yassin Juma, by the Ethiopian military, ostensibly because of coverage of the protests in Ethiopia.



A <u>tweet</u> by user <u>@henokgabisa</u> on 4 July 2020 referencing an article from <u>Kenyans.co.ke</u> where it is alleged that the Ethiopian military arrested Juma while covering massive protests that erupted in Ethiopia's Oromia Region, following the death of musician Haacaaluu Hundessa.

The article further states that, "other emerging reports allege that Yassin Juma was arrested out of his friendship with Ethiopian Oromo activist Jawar Mohammed."



A picture of the two can be seen on the website showing the 'crossed fists' sign observed on most of the Oromo protests posts and websites.

Join the #OromoProtests movement



You have the power to amplify the voices of over 40 million people. Lend your voice and champion the *rights* of people.

According to a <u>BBC article</u>, Jawar Mohammed is one of the most high-profile opposition politicians and the CEO of Oromia Media Network (OMN), an Ethiopian satellite television station hosted in the US, launched in 2013. Notably, OMN's Facebook page features among the top 10



Facebook pages with the highest interaction rates under the #OromoProtests in 2020.

An <u>article</u> posted by The Star on 5 August 2020, indicated that an Ethiopian court had ordered the release of Juma, adding that Kenya's Ministry of Foreign Affairs had been working behind the scenes to secure his release.



For the accounts created after 29 June 2020, we noted that 90% of the accounts lacked geo-location tags, however, the ones with geo-tags were in the following countries:

	Location of new accounts with geo-location tags					
	Country	Number of new accounts	Country	Number of new accounts		
1	USA	190	South Africa	4		
2	Australia	54	UAE	3		
3	Canada	24	Denmark	2		
4	United Kingdom	24	Uganda	2		
5	Ethiopia	14	Somalia	2		
6	Norway	13	France	2		
7	Saudi Arabia	12	Iraq	1		
8	Germany	10	Netherlands	1		
9	Egypt	8	Belgium	1		
10	Turkey	7	Kuwait	1		
11	Sweden	6	Japan	1		
12	Kenya	6	Switzerland	1		
13	Quatar	4				

Number of new accounts on Twiter with geo-location enabled per country . (Source: Twitter/ CfA)

It is worth noting that these are countries with large Ethiopian communities, particularly the US, which identified 250,000 Ethiopians in the <u>2008 census</u>.



Documenting coordination

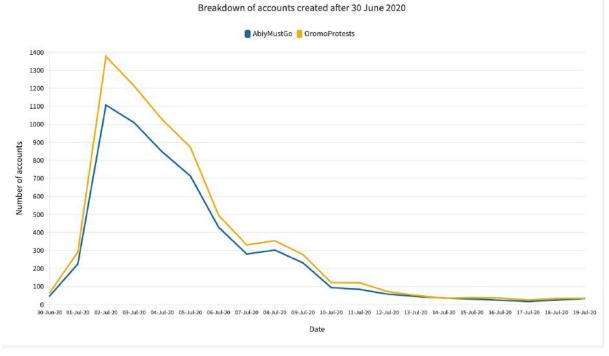
A first concern is whether any of the hashtags mentioned in this report was artificially boosted. Inauthentic activity on Twitter takes many forms, from bots (automated accounts) to "sock puppets" - human accounts with deceptive online identities. Such manipulation is often difficult to detect, as no one metric definitively proves an inauthentic account.

There is evidence of suspicious behavior associated with the #AbiyMustGo and #OromoProtests hashtags.

Recently created accounts

Out of 21,542 unique accounts that posted tweets using #AbiyMustGo and #Oromoprotests between 29th June and 2nd August 2020, 37.7% were new accounts, created after 30 June 2020, a day after Haacaaluu's death. These accounts were responsible for approximately 43% of all the posts in this period.

We further noted that for both hashtags, the majority of the accounts were created on 2 July 2020. Notably, 1107 twitter accounts using the hashtag #AbiyMustGo and 1376 accounts using the hashtag #OromoProtests were created on 2 July 2020



Newly created accounts using the hashtags #AbiyMustGo & #OromoProtests

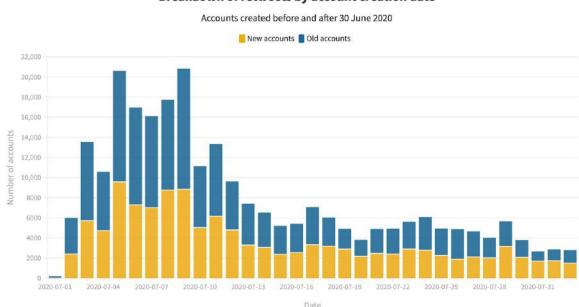
Timeline of accounts created between 30 Jun and 19 Jul 2020 (Source: Twitter/CfA)



Bot indicators and coordinated behaviour

Amplification

CfA noted that the hashtags #AbiyMustGo and #OromoProtests were retweeted a total of 262,736 times between 30th June and 2nd August 2020. These retweets originated from 14,897 unique accounts, 33% of which were created on or after 30 June 2020, a day after Haacaaluu's death. Additionally, two of the top 10 accounts with the highest number of retweets were from this group of new accounts. Oromobt, which had the highest number of retweets in this time period has been further analysed and discussed in subsequent sections of the dossier.





Breakdown of retweets between 1st July and 2 August 2020, by the account's creation date (Source: Twitter/ CfA)

	Twitter accounts with the highes	t number of retweets between	1 July and 2 Aug 2020
	Username	Creation date	Total number of retweets
1	Oromobt	2020-05-19	5,514
2	OromoLensa	2020-06-30	2,416
3	Wolisso	2009-09-13	2,137
4	Hawaii89859416	2020-07-09	1,864
5	KentoArba	2018-07-20	1,839
6	LeliseRegassa	2020-07-02	1,749
7	Abdulra06321014	2020-06-19	1,748
8	yuoahmed1	2016-10-02	1,743
9	Muktarmohd08	2018-07-29	1,538
10	hakimo895	2013-06-26	1,458

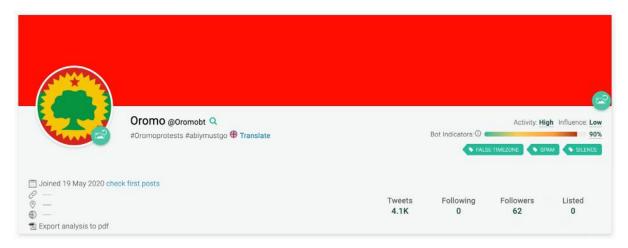
Twitter users with the highest number of retweets between 1 Jul 2020 and 2 Aug 2020. (Source:Twitter/ CFA)



Automation

Using <u>TruthNest</u>, a social media analytics tool also used to detect bot activity, we checked the metrics for a sample of the accounts identified above, created in 2020, and noted evidence of automation for a number of the profiles within the network.

The profiles @Oromobt, @OromoLensa, @Hawaii89859416, @Abdulra06321014, @Hamdia54084788 and @leliseRegassa had 90%, 90%, 60%, 60% and 60% bot indicator scores respectively on TruthNest.



Bot Indicators:0 🗲	Activity: High	Influence: Low 903
Following 29	Followers 85	Listed 0
	29	29 85





A B @Abdulra06321014 Q		Bot Indicators: 🛈 🗨	Activity: Hi	gh influence: Low 60%
 Joined 19 Jun 2020 check first posts 	Tweets 4.6K	Following 248	Followers 344	Listed 0

Hamdia @Hamdia54084788 Q		Bot Indicators: ①		nal Influence: Low 60% DUS NEWBIE
 ☐ Joined 3 Jul 2020 check first posts ⊘ — ∅ — ⊕ — ≅ Export analysis to pdf 	Tweets	Following	Followers	Listed
	146	3	4	0

lelise regassa @LeliseRegassa Q		Bot Indicators: ①	Activity: Hi Se timezone	gh Influence: Low 60%
☐ Joined 2 Jul 2020 check first posts	Tweets 2.7K	Following 65	Followers 51	Listed 0

Screengrab from TruthNest showing bot indicator levels for accounts with highest number of retweets created in 2020. (Source: TruthNest/ <u>CfA</u>)

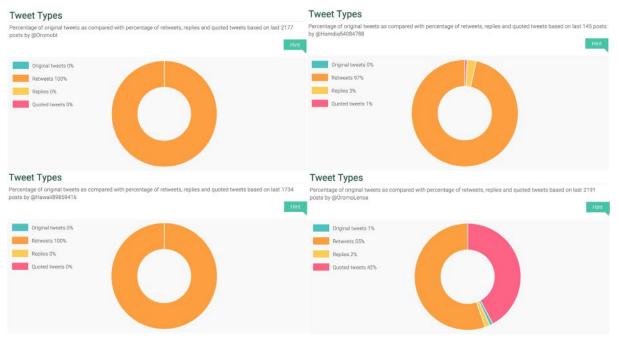
We noted that the accounts did not have identifiable profile information such as profile pictures, cover page pictures and bio information. This gives further indication that the creators of the bot accounts did not have the time to create identifiable profile information like normal user accounts would have.



The scores on TruthNest app were based on the following observations made on the accounts:

Accounts used to primarily retweet/reply

The accounts were primarily used in amplification of posts using the #OromoProtests and #AbiyMustGo by retweeting or replying to original tweets posted by other users on the network. The accounts not posting original content is another important sign that indicates bot activity.



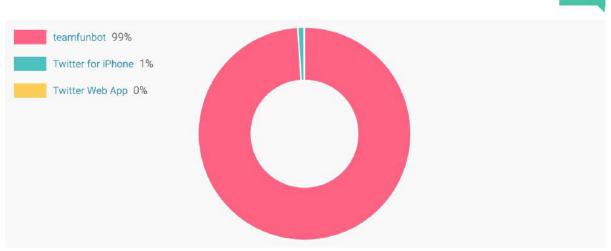
Screengrab from TruthNest showing tweet types for bot accounts (Source: TruthNest/ CfA)

Use of automation software

@Oromobt primarily used a posting utility called 'teamfunbot' to interact with the Twitter platform, indicating further evidence of automation.

Posting Tools

Utility used to post the Tweet. Tweets from the Twitter website have a source value of "Web Client".

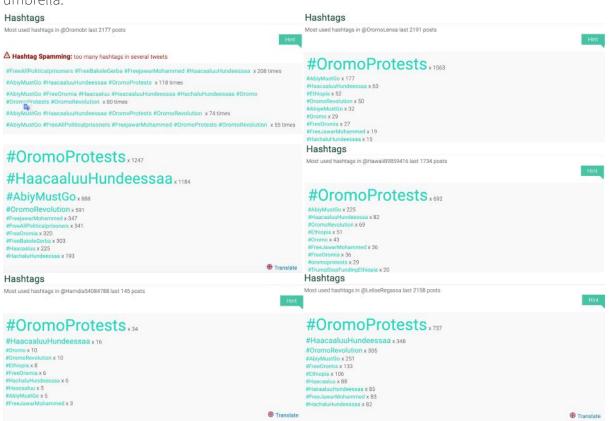


Screengrab from TruthNest showing posting tool used by @Oromobot (Source: TruthNest/ CfA)



Use of multiple hashtags/hashtag spamming

CfA further observed that the accounts retweeted multiple hashtags under the Oromo protests umbrella.



Screengrab from TruthNest showing Hashtags used by top retweet accounts (Source: TruthNest/ CfA)

Pre-drafted tweets

An emerging trend in social media activism is the use of pre-drafted messages, a quick and effective method to raise awareness on the subject. CfA identified two sites with pre-drafted tweets tied to both hashtags, created shortly after Haacaaluu's death.

The first site, justice4hachalu.org, calls for users to share one or more of the 72 available tweets, calling for the Prime Minister's resignation, the release of political prisoners, democracy and equality, the revocation of the PM's Nobel Peace Prize and equal treatment of the Oromo community. The tweets from this site were shared 207 times and retweeted 279 times between 2 July 2020 and 2 August 2020, accounting for 0.24% of the tweets posted in this time frame. We identified 46 geo-tagged tweets, 32 of which could be tagged to individual countries. As observed earlier in this dossier, the majority of the tweets originated from the diaspora.



Locations of geo-tagged tweets from justice4hachalu.org						
	Username	Number of tweets				
1	USA	20				
2	Australia	5				
3	Ethiopia	4				
4	Canada	2				
5	Sweden	1				

Location breakdown of geo-tagged tweets from justice4hachalu.org. (Source: Twitter/ CfA)

The second site, <u>oromoprotests.com</u>, calls for users to support the movement by sharing one or more of the four pre-drafted tweets, calling for the Prime Minister's resignation and the release of political prisoners. Additionally, the site had links to two petitions; one calling for the revocation of the PM's Nobel Peace Prize and the other calling for the release of political prisoners. Tweets from this site were shared 66 times and retweeted 313 times between 11 July and 2 August 2020, accounting for 0.08% of the tweets posted in this time frame. The tweets with the highest interactions majorly belonged to individuals in the diaspora.

Top 5 Twitter accounts with the highest interactions						
	Username	Tweet date	No of retweets	Location		
1	toltutufa	2020-07-18	251	Australia		
2	hambajht	2020-07-27	19	Nairobi, Kenya		
3	oromiatimes	2020-07-25	11	Ethiopia		
4	oromoroyaltyy	2020-07-22	7	Not indicated		
5	urgedinegde	2020-07-13	2	Australia		

Top 5 twitter accounts with the highest interactions. (Source: Twitter/ CfA)

Disinformation actors

CfA also observed cases where individuals using the hashtags shared false content or false information that could potentially polarise citizens in the country or across the diaspora. We noted that most of the cases identified were as a result of sharing old protest videos and photos, with a depiction of the current situation.

A tweet posted by user @AWoldetensa on 1 August 2020 showed military personnel and equipment allegedly in Shashamannee, a town in Aanaa in West Arsi Zone, Oromia Region, Ethiopia.







The empire is collapsing for good **!!** This is not a war zone but in Shashamannee, Arsi, #Oromia instead of celebrating Eid-UI-Adha Mubarak z nation is terrorized in this way since yesterday @UNHumanRights @NobelPrize

#Abiy_Must_Go #AbiyMustBeRemoved #OromoProtests #OromoRevolution



46 Retweets 39 Likes 5 Quote Tweets

This is further corroborated by a post from YouTube posted on 8 January 2019 showing the same truck.



A Google image reverse search on the photo showed that the picture had initially been used in an <u>article</u> on <u>https://eritrea-focus.org/</u> posted on 9 January 2019 when Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, Eritrea's President Isaias and Gedu Andargachew, President of the Amhara region, were in the Ethiopian town of Omhager to open the Ethiopia-Eritrea border checkpoint at Omhager-Humera.



We noted that this was potentially done to polarise and potentially incite backlash online.

Another photo posted by Facebook page called <u>Activist Yordanos</u> allegedly also showing the situation in Arsi, Oromia region, and hinting at a genocide against the Amhara native people. A Google reverse image search on the photo showed that it was a photo of the Rwandan genocide taken back in 1994 and used in several articles on the internet.





This Facebook post has since been fact-checked by <u>PesaCheck</u>, an independent fact-checking team, incubated by the same umbrella organisation that incubates the iLAB, and found to be <u>FALSE</u> information.



Conclusions

The #OromoProtests hashtag has had a relatively consistent presence on Twitter for the last seven years, with periodic increases in usage around key events in 2014, 2015, 2016 and recently in 2020.

The assassination of Haacaaluu Hundessa led to a significant increase in the level of social media activism interactions witnessed in Ethiopia for the hashtags analysed.

There was a significant contribution of the diaspora and international community in the online activism witnessed in 2020.

The internet shutdown in 2016 had an impact on the social media interactions then. However, in 2020 the online protests were spearheaded by the diaspora community, and therefore the conversations were seen to spike after the internet shutdown, especially on Twitter.

There was evidence of coordination and automation on the hashtag activism with lead channels such as websites with pre-drafted tweets, newly created accounts, use of amplification bots and use of automation softwares.

The type of false information being shared on social platforms were mainly focused on the reuse of old photos to potentially polarise the public into action.



Recommendations

We recommend that:

- In the case of political unrest, there should be dialogue between the government and its citizens. It's important for governments to understand that internet shutdowns also slow down the economy and have a negative impact on many sectors of society. Authorities need to look for alternative ways to handle the issue at hand instead of resorting to a shutdown policy.
- Online activism should not be restricted as they are a major part of democracy shaping. Contribution from the international and diaspora community is also significant in facilitating accountability back home. However, use of false content and disinformation that could polarise citizens and incite violence should be highly discouraged and condemned.



Our methodology

We collected data majorly focusing on the topics #oromoprotests and #abiymustgo which were extensively used for raising awareness of the campaign. We set date parameters (between 01 May 2013 and 02 Aug 2020).

Therefore our collection is best effort, meaning we collect as much as we can at the moment we collect. There is no guarantee that rerunning the pipeline on the same dataset gives the same results. However, we don't expect a significant difference given a large sample size.

Data Collection

Data for this report came from two sources :

- Twitter We collected data using Twint with parameters set within the timeframe we intended to analyse, thereby collecting a sample of 214,833 public tweets.
- Facebook data was collected via CrowdTangle. Here we resolved to gather both the public pages and groups' data.

Profile Tagging

With all the tweets in, we extracted all usernames engaged with either of the hashtags and used Botometer (a scoring system for determining the likelihood that Twitter accounts are automated) to flag accounts for bot-like traits. We set a threshold score 3.5 / 5 for the profiles to be tagged as suspicious bot accounts.

Drafted tweets

Our analysis on the pre-drafted tweets was mainly sourced from these websites:

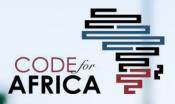
- Justice4hachalu
- Oromo Protests

We collected the drafted tweets and used that set as our corpus for matching texts within the collected data. With the predrafts, we tagged the sources and amplification points thereafter.

Preliminary Analysis

To restrict our sample to recently active users, we generated a subset that had accounts created within 30 days or less with a reference date set on the last day of data collection (02 Aug 2020) having at least 500 tweets to filter accounts that matched this criteria. This subset became the focus for review on any form of coordinated activities.





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