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ETHIOPIA

	2012	2013
INTERNET FREEDOM STATUS	NOT FREE	NOT FREE
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	22	22
Limits on Content (0-35)	27	28
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	26	29
Total (0-100)	75	79

POPULATION: 87 million

INTERNET PENETRATION 2012: 1 percent

SOCIAL MEDIA/ICT APPS BLOCKED: Yes

POLITICAL/SOCIAL CONTENT BLOCKED: Yes

BLOGGERS/ICT USERS ARRESTED: No

PRESS FREEDOM 2013 STATUS: Not Free

* 0=most free, 100=least free

KEY DEVELOPMENTS: MAY 2012 – APRIL 2013

- Prior to the announcement of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's death in August 2012, speculation over the state of his health led to an intensified crackdown against the media and freedom of expression online (see **INTRODUCTION**).
- The Ethiopian government increased its technological capacity to filter, block, and monitor internet and mobile phone communications, with assistance from the Chinese authorities (see **LIMITS ON CONTENT**).
- The Telecom Fraud Offences Law, enacted in July 2012, toughened restrictions on ICTs and extended the anti-terrorism law and criminal code to electronic communications (see **VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS**).
- Two individuals were prosecuted for their ICT activities, while harsh sentences were upheld for two imprisoned opposition journalists (see **VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS**).
- The commercial spyware toolkit FinFisher was discovered in Ethiopia in August 2012 (see **VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS**).

INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia has one of the lowest rates of internet and mobile telephone penetration in the world, as meager infrastructure, a government monopoly over the telecom sector, and obstructive telecom policies have notably hindered the growth of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the country. Despite low access, the government maintains a strict system of controls over digital media, making Ethiopia the only country in Sub-Saharan Africa to implement nationwide internet filtering. Such a system is made possible by the state's monopoly over the country's only telecom company, Ethio Telecom, which returned to government control after a two-year management contract with France Telecom expired in December 2012. In addition, the government's implementation of deep-packet inspection technology for censorship was indicated when the Tor network, which helps people communicate anonymously online, was blocked in mid-2012.

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who ruled Ethiopia for over 20 years, died in August 2012 while seeking treatment for an undisclosed illness. Before his death was officially confirmed on August 20th, widespread media speculation about Zenawi's whereabouts and the state of his health prompted the authorities to intensify its censorship of online content. A series of Muslim protests against religious discrimination in July 2012 also sparked increased efforts to control ICTs, with social media pages and news websites disseminating information about the demonstrations targeted for blocking. Moreover, internet and text messaging speeds were reported to be extremely slow, leading to unconfirmed suspicions that the authorities had deliberately obstructed telecom services as part of a wider crackdown on the Ethiopian Muslim press for its coverage of the demonstrations.

In 2012, legal restrictions on the use and provision of ICTs increased with the enactment of the Telecom Fraud Offences law in September,¹ which toughened a ban on certain advanced internet applications and worryingly extended the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation and 2004 Criminal Code to electronic communications.² Furthermore, the government's ability to monitor online activity and intercept digital communications became more sophisticated with assistance from the Chinese government, while the commercial spyware toolkit FinFisher was discovered in Ethiopia in August 2012.

Repression against bloggers, internet users and mobile phone users continued during the coverage period of this report, with at least two prosecutions reported. After a long trial and months of international advocacy on behalf of the prominent dissident blogger, Eskinder Nega, who was charged with supporting a terrorist group, Nega was found guilty in July 2012 and sentenced to 18 years in prison.³

¹ "A Proclamation on Telecom Fraud Offence," *Federal Negarit Gazeta* No. 61, September 4, 2012, <http://www.abbyssinialaw.com/uploads/761.pdf>.

² Article 19, "Ethiopia: Proclamation on Telecom Fraud Offences," legal analysis, August 6, 2012, <http://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/3401/en/ethiopia:-proclamation-on-telecom-fraud-offences>.

³ William Easterly et al., "The Case of Eskinder Nega," *New York Review of Books*, January 12, 2012, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/jan/12/case-eskinder-nega/?pagination=false>; Committee to Protect

OBSTACLES TO ACCESS

In 2012, access to ICTs in Ethiopia remained extremely limited and hampered by slow speeds and the state's tight grip on the telecom sector. Government investments in expanding access to remote areas of the country were found to be associated with political motives.

Internet and mobile phone services were introduced in Ethiopia in 1997 and 1999, respectively.⁴ In recent years, the government attempted to increase access through investments in fiber-optic cables, satellite links, and mobile broadband services, investing approximately 10 percent of the country's gross domestic product in the telecom sector over the past decade.⁵

Nevertheless, Ethiopia's telecommunications infrastructure is among the least developed in Africa and is almost entirely absent from rural areas, where about 85 percent of the population resides. As of the end of 2012, internet penetration stood at just 1.5 percent, up slightly from 1.1 percent in 2011, according to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU).⁶ Nevertheless, the number of fixed broadband subscriptions increased dramatically from 4,600 subscriptions in 2011 to nearly 38,000 subscriptions in 2012, as reported by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, though such subscriptions still only represent a penetration rate of just 0.4 percent.⁷

Mobile phone penetration in 2012 was higher at roughly 24 percent with a little over 20.5 million subscriptions, up from a 17 percent penetration rate in 2011.⁸ Meanwhile, the use of internet-enabled mobile devices is increasing, particularly in semi-urban areas.⁹ While all of the above reflect very slight improvements over 2011, such penetration rates represent extremely limited access to ICTs by global standards, and an ICT sector that remains far behind the rest of the world.¹⁰ Furthermore, an adult literacy rate of 30 percent means that the majority of Ethiopians would be unable to take full advantage of online resources even if they had access to the

Journalists, "Ethiopia Sentences Eskinder, 5 Others on Terror Charges," July 13, 2012, <http://cpj.org/2012/07/ethiopia-sentences-eskinder-six-others-on-terror-c.php>.

⁴ The first use of internet-like electronic communication was in 1993, when the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa launched the Pan African Documentation and Information Service Network (PADISNET) project, establishing electronic communication nodes in several countries, including Ethiopia. PADISNET provided the first store-and-forward email and electronic-bulletin board services in Ethiopia. It was used by a few hundred people, primarily academics, and staff of international agencies or nongovernmental organizations.

⁵ World Bank, "Chapter 8: Corruption in the Telecommunications Sector in Ethiopia: A Preliminary Overview," in Janelle Plummer (ed.), *Diagnosing Corruption in Ethiopia*, World Bank Publications, 2012, <http://issuu.com/world.bank.publications/docs/9780821395318>.

⁶ International Telecommunication Union, "Percentage of Individuals Using the Internet, 2000-2012," <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

⁷ International Telecommunication Union, "Fixed (Wired)-Broadband Subscriptions, 2000-2012."

⁸ International Telecommunication Union, "Mobile-cellular Telephone Subscriptions, 2000-2012."

⁹ Markos Lemma, "Disconnected Ethiopian Netizens," *Digital Development Debates* (blog), <http://www.digital-development-debates.org/issues/09-prejudice/african-innovation/disconnected-ethiopian-netizens/>.

¹⁰ Lishan Adam, "Ethiopia ICT Sector Performance Review 2009/2010," Research ICT Africa, 2010, http://www.researchictafrica.net/publications/Policy_Paper_Series_Towards_Evidence-based_ICT_Policy_and_Regulation_-_Volume_2/Vol%20%20Paper%20%20-%20Ethiopia%20ICT%20Sector%20Performance%20Review%202010.pdf.

technology.¹¹ Radio remains the principal mass medium through which most Ethiopians stay informed.

The combined cost of purchasing a computer, initiating an internet connection, and usage charges makes internet access beyond the reach of most Ethiopians. According to a study by the ITU, Ethiopia's broadband internet connections are among the most expensive in the world when compared with monthly income, second only to the Central African Republic.¹² Prices are set by the state-controlled Ethio Telecom and kept artificially high, though the telecom introduced a new tariff effective on January 1, 2013 that offers a discount for mobile- and fixed-line international calls in a move to generate more revenue.¹³ Other price packages dating from 2011 are still current.¹⁴ These reduced subscription charges from \$80 to \$13 and monthly fees from over \$200 for unlimited usage to \$17-41 for 1-4 GB of use. For comparison, the annual gross national income per capita at purchasing power parity was \$92.50 per month as of the data available during the coverage period.¹⁵ While these tariffs have rendered the service slightly more affordable—though still relatively expensive—for individual users, cybercafe owners have complained that the lack of an unlimited usage option could hurt the financial viability of their business.¹⁶

The majority of internet users rely on cybercafes to access the web, and the number of cybercafes has grown in recent years, especially in large cities, after a brief period in 2001–02 during which the government declared them illegal and forced some to shut down. Since July 2002, new cybercafes have been required to register for licenses through the Ethiopian Telecommunications Agency (ETA). Nevertheless, connections are often slow and unreliable. A 2010 study commissioned by Manchester University's School of Education found that accessing an online e-mail account and opening one message took six minutes in a typical cybercafé in the capital, Addis Ababa, with a broadband connection, and as of 2013, such slow speeds are still standard.¹⁷ Independent sources have noted that uploading an attachment to an e-mail can take more than 10 minutes. Meanwhile, internet access via mobile phones is also beset by slow connection speeds. According to a 2012 report by the Internet Society, telecom policy issues and poor connectivity are largely to blame for the country's low internet speeds.¹⁸

¹¹ UNICEF, "Ethiopia: Statistics," accessed July 16, 2012, http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/ethiopia_statistics.html#67.

¹² Jonathan Fildes, "UN Reveals Global Disparity in Broadband Access," BBC News, September 2, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-11162656>.

¹³ "Ethio Telecom Reduces Tariff for International Calls," *Addis Fortune* via *All Africa*, January 7, 2013, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201301081250.html>.

¹⁴ "Residential Tariff," Ethio Telecom, accessed July 16, 2012, <http://www.ethiotelecom.et/products/residential-tariff.php>.

¹⁵ World Bank, "Gross National Income Per Capital 2011, Atlas method and PPP," World Bank Databank, 2011, accessed July 18, 2012, <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/GNI-per-capita-Atlas-and-PPP-table>.

¹⁶ Elias Gebreselassie, "Ethio-Telecom Limits EVDO Internet Access," *Addis Fortune*, April 3, 2011, http://addisfortune.com/Vol_10_No_570_Archive/Ethio-Telecom%20Limits%20EVDO%20Internet%20Access.htm; "Ethio-Telecom Unveils Wide-ranging Tariff Changes Across All Services," *TeleGeography*, April 5, 2011, <http://bit.ly/16PXRqz>.

¹⁷ Andinet Teshome, *Internet Access in the Capital of Africa* (School of Education, University of Manchester, 2009); EthioTube video, posted by "Kebena," accessed August 06, 2010, <http://www.ethiotube.net/video/9655/Internet-Access-in-the-Capital-of-Africa-Addis-Ababa>.

¹⁸ Dessalegn Mequanint, "Understanding the Factors that Force Down Ethiopia's Rankings in the Digital Economy and their Implications in the ICT Policy and Strategy," Internet Society, 2012, http://www.internetsociety.org/sites/default/files/Final%20Report_UnderstandingTheFactorsEthiopiaDigitalRankings.pdf.

While internet access is mostly concentrated in urban areas, the government has sought to increase access for government offices and schools in rural areas via satellite links. WoredaNet (“network of district administrations”), for instance, connects over 500 *woredas* (local districts) to regional and central government offices, providing services such as video conferencing and internet access. Similarly, SchoolNet connects over 500 high schools around the country to a gateway that provides video- and audio-streamed educational programming.¹⁹ Internet speeds within these networks, however, remain prohibitively slow and outages are common. Moreover, the two projects have increased the ubiquity of the state as both a service provider and political entity across the country. A 2012 study by the Open Society Foundation noted that the projects have been used to broadcast political messages from the central government in Addis Ababa to teachers, students, and district administrators in the remote parts of the country.²⁰

Ethiopia is connected to the international internet via satellite, a fiber-optic cable that passes through Sudan and connects to its international gateway, and another cable that connects through Djibouti to an international undersea cable.²¹ In an effort to expand connectivity, the government has reportedly installed several thousand kilometers of fiber-optic cable throughout the country in recent years.²² There are also plans in place to connect Ethiopia to a global undersea cable network through the East African Submarine Cable System (EASSy) project, which was completed and launched in July 2010, but its effects on Ethiopia have yet to be seen as of mid-2013.²³ Connection to the international internet is centralized via Ethio Telecom, from which cybercafes must purchase their bandwidth.

Ethiopia’s centralized backbone makes internet access highly vulnerable to widespread service disruptions at the hands of the authorities. In July 2012, internet and mobile phone text messaging speeds were reported to be extremely slow amid a series of weekly uprisings by Ethiopian Muslims in protest against religious discrimination by the government.²⁴ During this time, some individuals complained that text messages took days, even weeks, to reach their recipients.²⁵ Given the role that social media tools and text messaging services played in organizing the demonstrations,²⁶ many blamed Ethio Telecom for deliberately obstructing service and considered the effort as part of a wider crackdown on the Ethiopian Muslim press for its coverage of the demonstrations.²⁷

¹⁹ Samuel Kinde, “Internet in Ethiopia: Is Ethiopia Off-Line or Wired to the Rim?” MediaETHIOPIA, November 2007, http://www.mediaethiopia.com/Engineering/Internet_in_Ethiopia_November2007.htm.

²⁰ Iginio Gagliardone and Nicole Strelau, “Mapping Digital Media: Digital Media, Conflict and Diasporas in the Horn of Africa,” Open Society Foundations, December 2011, <http://bit.ly/19iyGxZ>.

²¹ Hailu Teklehaimanot, “Unraveling ZTE’s Network,” *Addis Fortune*, August 22, 2010, <http://www.addisfortune.com/Interview-Unraveling%20ZTEs%20Network.htm>.

²² Kinde, “Internet in Ethiopia.”

²³ Brian Adero, “WIOCC-EASSy Cable Ready for Business,” *IT News Africa*, July 23, 2010, <http://www.itnewsafrika.com/?p=8419>.

²⁴ “Ethiopia’s Muslims Protest Against Being ‘Treated Like Terrorists,’” *France 24*, July 25, 2012, <http://observers.france24.com/content/20120725-ethiopia-muslims-protest-labeled-terrorists-addis-ababa-muslim-council-awoliya-mosque-al-ahbash-anawar>.

²⁵ “ETC sucks,” Facebook group, accessed June 17, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/112900380991/>.

²⁶ Endalk, “Muslims Take Campaign Online for Religious Independence,” *Global Voices*, May 12, 2012, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/05/12/ethiopia-muslims-take-campaign-online-for-religious-independence/>.

²⁷ “Ethiopian Authorities Crack Down on Muslim Press,” Committee to Protect Journalists, August 9, 2012, <http://www.cpj.org/2012/08/ethiopian-authorities-crack-down-on-muslim-press.php>.

The internet was last cut-off in May 2011 in the lead up to planned demonstrations inspired by the early-2011 anti-government protests in the Middle East,²⁸ though it remains unclear whether the cause was a deliberate government attempt to restrict communication at a sensitive time, a technical problem, or sabotage of a fiber-optic cable. Separately, when high-profile international events, such as African Union meetings, take place in Addis Ababa or other major cities, the government has been known to redirect much of the country's bandwidth to the host venues, leaving ordinary users with even slower connections than usual.

The Ethiopian Telecommunications Agency (ETA) is the primary regulatory body overseeing the telecommunications sector. Although it was established as an autonomous federal agency, in practice, the ETA is tightly controlled by the government. In addition, the space for independent initiatives, entrepreneurial or otherwise, is extremely limited.²⁹ In 2011, the government began granting permission to private companies that run internet-dependent operations to acquire and use VSAT links,³⁰ connections previously reserved for governmental and international organizations per special authorization.³¹ Under the new directive, private companies are supposedly permitted to use the technology for their own operations, but bureaucratic redtape significantly hinders the service.³² Moreover, the directive does not allow companies to provide services to third parties, enabling Ethio Telecom to maintain its monopoly on public internet access.

Despite repeated international pressure to liberalize telecommunications in Ethiopia, the government has been reluctant to ease its grip on the sector.³³ In early 2013, management of the state-owned Ethio Telecom fell back into government hands after a two-year management agreement with France Telecom expired in December 2012.³⁴ In addition to this state monopoly, increasing corruption in the telecommunications sector has been highlighted as a major reason for poor and unrealizable telecom services in Ethiopia.³⁵ According to a 2012 World Bank report, the telecommunications sector in Ethiopia has the highest risk of corruption compared to other sectors assessed, such as land, education, and construction, among others.³⁶

²⁸ See Freedom on the Net 2012. Also, "Internet is Down Throughout Ethiopia – Update," *Ethiopian Review*, May 26, 2011, <http://www.ethiopianreview.com/content/33165>.

²⁹ Al Shiferaw, "Connecting Telecentres: An Ethiopian Perspective," *Telecentre Magazine*, September 2008, <http://bit.ly/16DdF6Z>.

³⁰ "Private VSAT Permit Directive Number 2/2003" as noted in: "Ethiopia to Liberalise VSAT Market," Screen Africa, November 16, 2011, <http://www.screenafrica.com/page/news/industry/1097820-Ethiopia-to-liberalise-VSAT-market>.

³¹ Yelibenwork Ayele, "Companies in Ethiopia Permitted to Use VSAT," *2Merkato*, October 3, 2011, <http://www.2merkato.com/20111003380/companies-in-ethiopia-permitted-to-use-vsats>.

³² Jon Evans, "The Unconquered Nation, Crippled By Bureaucrats," *TechCrunch*, May 30, 2011, <http://techcrunch.com/2011/05/30/unconquered-nation-crippled-ethiopia-internet/>.

³³ "US urge Ethiopia to Liberalise Telecom Sector," *Africa News via Somali State*, March 10, 2010, <http://www.somalistate.com/englishnewspage.php?articleid=4638>; Technology Strategies International, "ICT Investment Opportunities in Ethiopia—2010," March 1, 2010, <http://bit.ly/1bmsGvq>.

³⁴ "France Telecom's Management Contract with Ethio Telecom Ends," *Telecompaper*, January 4, 2013, <http://www.telecompaper.com/news/france-telecoms-management-contract-with-ethio-telecom-ends--917095>; Meraf Leykun, "The Management Contract with France Telecom concluded," *2Merkato*, January 4, 2013, <http://www.2merkato.com/the-management-contract-with-france-telecom-concluded>.

³⁵ Gabriella Mulligan, "Ethiopian Telecoms Sector Amongst Most Corrupt in Country," *Humanipo*, January 16, 2013, <http://www.humanipo.com/news/3331/Ethiopian-telecoms-sector-amongst-most-corrupt-in-country>.

³⁶ Janelle Plummer (ed.), *Diagnosing Corruption in Ethiopia*.

China has emerged as a key investor and contractor in Ethiopia's telecommunications sector,³⁷ and in October 2012, the government signed new two-year contracts with the Chinese telecom companies, Zhongxing Telecommunication Corporation (ZTE) and Huawei.³⁸ Given allegations that the Chinese authorities have provided the Ethiopian government with technology that can be used for political repression—such as surveillance cameras and satellite jamming equipment—in the past,³⁹ the new contracts have led to increasing fears that the Chinese may also be assisting the authorities in developing more robust internet and mobile phone censorship and surveillance capacities (see “Violations of User Rights”).

LIMITS ON CONTENT

Ethiopian authorities persistently deny engaging in online censorship,⁴⁰ but the results of the most recent independent tests conducted by the OpenNet Initiative (ONI) in 2012, and checked again by Freedom House in January 2013, indicate otherwise. Both sets of tests found that the Ethiopian government imposes nationwide, politically motivated internet filtering.⁴¹ The blocking of websites is somewhat sporadic, tending to tighten ahead of sensitive political events. This on again, off again dynamic continued throughout 2012, especially during the disappearance of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and the subsequent announcement of his death in June 2012. There were also indications that the technical sophistication of the government's blocking has increased and that periods of openness are shrinking.

The government's approach to internet filtering has generally entailed hindering access to a list of specific internet protocol (IP) addresses or domain names at the level of the international gateway, though it is believed that the government has been introducing more sophisticated equipment capable of blocking a webpage based on a keyword in the URL path.⁴² In May 2012, the Tor network—an online tool that enables users to browse anonymously—was blocked,⁴³ indicating

³⁷ Isaac Idun-Arkurst and James Laing, *The Impact of the Chinese Presence in Africa* (London: africapractice, 2007), http://www.davidandassociates.co.uk/davidandblog/newwork/China_in_Africa_5.pdf.

³⁸ “ZTE, Huawei to Be Awarded Ethiopian Telecommunications Contracts,” Bloomberg, October 12, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-10-11/zte-huawei-to-be-awarded-ethiopian-telecommunications-contracts.html>.

³⁹ Hilina Alemu, “INSA Installing Street Surveillance Cameras,” *Addis Fortune*, March 21, 2010, <http://www.addisfortune.com/Vol%2010%20No%20516%20Archive/INSA%20Installing%20Street%20Surveillance%20Cameras.htm>; “China Involved in ESAT Jamming,” *Addis Neger*, June 22, 2010, <http://addisnegeronline.com/2010/06/china-involved-in-esat-jamming/>.

⁴⁰ “Ethiopia: Authorities Urged to Unblock Websites,” Integrated Regional Information Networks, May 25, 2006, <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=59115>.

⁴¹ Irene Poetranto, “Update on Information Controls in Ethiopia,” OpenNet Initiative, November 1, 2012, <http://opennet.net/blog/2012/11/update-information-controls-ethiopia>.

⁴² Daniel Berhane, “Ethiopia's Web Filtering: Advanced Technology, Hypocritical Criticisms, Bleeding Constitution,” *Daniel Berhane's Blog*, January 16, 2011, <http://danielberhane.wordpress.com/2011/01/16/ethiopias-web-filtering-advanced-technology-hypocritical-criticisms-bleeding-constitution/>.

⁴³ “Ethiopia Introduces Deep Packet Inspection,” *Tor*, May 31, 2012, <https://blog.torproject.org/blog/ethiopia-introduces-deep-packet-inspection>.

Ethio Telecom had deployed deep packet inspection to enable more sophisticated, selective filtering of internet traffic.⁴⁴

The most recent ONI tests conducted from September 17-19, 2012 found that filtering by Ethio Telecom focuses primarily on independent online news media, political blogs, and Ethiopian human rights groups' websites.⁴⁵ Of the 1,375 unique URLs tested, 73 were blocked, including the online portals, Nazret and Cyber Ethiopia, and the websites of opposition movements such as the Solidarity Committee for Ethiopian Political Prisoners. Numerous news websites and forums reporting on the imprisonment of bloggers and journalists, such as *EthioMedia*, *Addis Voice*, *Addis Neger*, and *Ethiopian Review* were also found blocked,⁴⁶ in addition to the circumvention and anonymization tools, Ultrasurf and Psiphon.

While ONI found the websites of international nongovernmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Reporters Without Borders—all of which have criticized the Ethiopian government's human rights record—unblocked during its September 2012 test, independent tests conducted by Freedom House throughout 2012 found that the websites of Freedom House, Electronic Frontier Foundation, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International were inaccessible at irregular intervals. Further, another test conducted by Freedom House in early 2013 found that 70 websites related to news and views, 16 websites belonging to different Ethiopian political parties, 40 blogs, 7 audio-video websites, and 40 Facebook pages were not accessible in Ethiopia.⁴⁷ As of April 2013, the above-mentioned websites, as well as those of Ethsat (an independent exile television station) and *Dilethiopia* (an opposition website), remained inaccessible.

International news outlets became increasingly targeted for censorship in the past year. Al Arabiya and both of Al Jazeera's Arabic and English websites were both blocked intermittently throughout 2012 and early 2013,⁴⁸ while the *Washington Post* became a new target for blocking after the paper reported on the prime minister's whereabouts in August 2012.⁴⁹ The article remained blocked as of April 2013. An online *Forbes* article titled, "Requiem for a Reprobate Ethiopian Tyrant Should Not Be Lionized," which was written in response to the local and global praise of the late prime minister's debatable economic growth achievements, was also effectively blocked in August 2012 and remained so at the time of writing.⁵⁰

In addition, the website of a Swedish state broadcaster was blocked in September 2012 for reporting on the release of two Swedish journalists who had been imprisoned for their alleged

⁴⁴ Warwick Ashford, "Ethiopian Government Blocks Tor Network Online Anonymity," *Computer Weekly*, June 28, 2012, <http://www.computerweekly.com/news/2240158237/Ethiopian-government-blocks-Tor-Network-online-anonymity>.

⁴⁵ Irene Poetranto, "Update on Information Controls in Ethiopia," OpenNet Initiative, November 1, 2012, <http://opennet.net/blog/2012/11/update-information-controls-ethiopia>.

⁴⁶ Poetranto, "Update on Information Controls in Ethiopia,".

⁴⁷ Independent test conducted by Freedom House consultant, early 2013.

⁴⁸ "Ethiopia 'Blocks' Al Jazeera Websites," Al Jazeera, March 18, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/03/201331793613725182.html>.

⁴⁹ Mohammed Ademo, "Media Restrictions Tighten in Ethiopia," *Columbia Journalism Review*, August 13, 2012, http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/ethiopia_news_crackdown.php?page=all.

⁵⁰ Research conducted by Freedom House consultant.

support of the Ogaden National Liberation Front rebel group.⁵¹ Certain webpages were also restricted in response to the series of weekly Muslims protests against religious discrimination by the government in mid-2012, including the Facebook page and blog of protest organizers titled, “*Dimtsachin Yisema*” (“Let Our Voice Be Heard”). Al Jazeera’s main website was blocked after it published a discussion forum about the continuing Muslim protests.⁵²

In the past year, the authorities have become more sophisticated in their censorship techniques, electing to block select webpages as opposed to entire websites. There are also worrying suspicions that the authorities may have learned to block websites hosted on foreign servers. In April 2013, one local human rights activist group confirmed that their website was blocked, despite being hosted on both foreign and mirror servers.⁵³ In addition, some restrictions are placed on mobile phones, such as the requirement for a text message to obtain prior approval from Ethio Telecom if it is to be sent to more than ten recipients.⁵⁴ A bulk text message sent without prior approval is automatically blocked.

Meanwhile, social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are available, though worries have increased over potential government plans to block social media tools altogether. These concerns were particularly pronounced following news about Prime Minister Meles Zenawi’s health in July 2012, which provoked an intensified crackdown against the media.⁵⁵ In response to the public debate circulating online over the prime minister’s whereabouts, the state-run Ethiopian television station aired a special program to censure the role of social media in society, blaming it for spreading false rumors, being destructive to society’s well-being, hampering productivity, and undermining citizens’ rights.⁵⁶ The social media curation tool Storify was also blocked during this period.⁵⁷

International blog-hosting platforms such as Blogspot have been frequently blocked since the disputed parliamentary elections of 2005, during which the opposition used online communication tools to organize and disseminate information that was critical of the ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front.⁵⁸ In 2007, the government instituted a blanket block on the domain names of two popular blog-hosting websites, Blogspot and Nazret, though the authorities have since become more sophisticated in their censorship techniques, now blocking select pages such as the *Zone9* independent blog hosted on Blogspot,⁵⁹ as opposed to entire blogging platforms. Nazret, however, remained completely blocked at the end of the coverage period. Circumvention

⁵¹ “Swedish State Television Website Blocked in Ethiopia,” *Ethiopian Review*, September 22, 2012, <http://www.ethiopianreview.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=42883&p=239162>.

⁵² Ademo, “Media Restrictions Tighten in Ethiopia.”

⁵³ Interview conducted by Freedom House consultant. All interviews were conducted in Ethiopia with subjects who requested anonymity.

⁵⁴ Interview with individuals working in the telecom sector, as well as a test conducted by a Freedom House consultant who found it was not possible for an ordinary user to send out a bulk text message.

⁵⁵ Ademo, “Media Restrictions Tighten in Ethiopia.”

⁵⁶ Ademo, “Media Restrictions Tighten in Ethiopia.”

⁵⁷ Ademo, “Media Restrictions Tighten in Ethiopia.”

⁵⁸ Bogdan Popa, “Google Blocked in Ethiopia,” *Softpedia*, May 3, 2007, <http://news.softpedia.com/news/Google-Blocked-In-Ethiopia-53799.shtml>.

⁵⁹ Zone9 blog hosted at: <http://zone9ethio.blogspot.com/>.

strategies have also been targeted, with the term “proxy” yielding no search results on Google, according to an independent source. Some speculate that the search is being filtered through the URL and instantly redirected to a fake Google website. Meanwhile, the terms “sex” or “porn” are still searchable.

Procedures for determining which websites should be blocked and when are extremely opaque. There are no published lists of blocked websites or publicly available criteria for how such decisions are made, and users are met with an error message when trying to access a blocked website. This lack of transparency is exacerbated by the government’s continued denial of its censorship efforts, though in September 2012, the director of the Information Network Security Agency (INSA), Brigadier General Tekleberahan Weldearegay, was quoted in an interview for the government-owned Amharic-language magazine, *Zemen*, underscoring the “necessity” of blocking online content that is harmful to Ethiopian society.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, the decision-making process does not appear to be centrally controlled, as various governmental entities—including INSA and Ethio Telecom—seem to be implementing their own lists, contributing to the phenomenon of inconsistent blocking.

In addition to increasing online censorship, politically objectionable content has been targeted for removal, often by way of threats from security officials who personally seek out users and bloggers to instruct them to take down certain content. The growing practice suggests that at least some voices within Ethiopia’s small online community are being closely watched. In one notable instance, a video of the late Meles Zenawi being heckled by an activist while in Washington D.C. for a G8 meeting in early 2012 was taken down shortly after it was posted online. Searching for the video on YouTube and elsewhere has yielded no results except for other non-contentious videos of Zenawi.

Lack of adequate funding represents another challenge for independent online media, as fear of government pressure dissuades Ethiopian businesses from advertising with politically critical websites. The authorities also use regime apologists, paid commentators, and pro-government websites to proactively manipulate the online news and information landscape. Acrimonious exchanges between commentators on apologist websites and a wide array of diaspora critics and opposition forces have become common in online political debates. There was a noticeable increase in the number of pro-government commentators in the past year, especially during the period of speculation over Meles Zanawi’s disappearance.

Regime critics and opposition forces in the diaspora increasingly use the internet as a platform for political debate and an indirect avenue for providing information to local newspapers. The domestic Ethiopian blogosphere has been expanding, in spite of the blocks on blogging platforms since 2005, though most of the blogging activity on Ethiopian issues still originates in the diaspora. Furthermore, increased repression against journalists working in the traditional media and a number of bloggers throughout 2012 has generated a chilling effect in the online sphere. Few

⁶⁰ D. Tizazu, “Whose Hidden Agenda?” [in Amharic], *Zemen*, 2012.

Ethiopian journalists work for both domestic print media and overseas online outlets as this could draw repercussions, and many bloggers publish anonymously to avoid reprisals.⁶¹

Over the past two years, Facebook has become one of the most popular mediums through which Ethiopians share and consume information, with the country's Facebook penetration exceeding its rate of internet penetration due to increasing access via mobile phones.⁶² Social media websites have also become significant platforms for political deliberation and social justice campaigns. For example, in November 2012 a group of young Ethiopian bloggers and activists based in Addis Ababa launched a Facebook and Twitter campaign to demand that the government respect the fundamental freedoms enshrined in the Ethiopian Constitution,⁶³ though the campaign ultimately fell on deaf ears. Overall, many civil society groups based in the country are wary of mobilizing against the government, and calls for protest come mostly from the Ethiopian diaspora rather than from local activists who fear the government's tendency toward violent crackdowns against protest movements.

VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS

During the coverage period, the Ethiopian government's already limited space for online expression continued to deteriorate alongside its poor treatment of journalists. In 2012, repression against bloggers and ICT users increased, with several arrests and at least one prosecution reported. The Telecom Fraud Offences law enacted in September 2012 toughened the ban on advanced internet applications and established criminal liability for certain types of content communicated electronically. Furthermore, monitoring of online activity and interception of digital communications intensified, with the deployment of FinFisher surveillance technology against users confirmed in early 2013.

Constitutional provisions guarantee freedom of expression and media freedom in Ethiopia.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, in recent years the government has adopted problematic laws that restrict free expression.⁶⁵ For one, the 2008 Mass Media and Freedom of Information Proclamation includes a clause that permits only Ethiopian nationals to establish mass media outlets. The media law also prescribes crippling fines, licensing restrictions for establishing a media outlet, and powers allowing the government to impound periodical publications.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Lemma, "Disconnected Ethiopian Netizens."

⁶² Lemma, "Disconnected Ethiopian Netizens."

⁶³ Endalk, "Movement to 'Respect the Constitution' in Ethiopia," *Global Voices*, November 11, 2012, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/12/11/movement-to-respect-the-constitution-in-ethiopia/>.

⁶⁴ "Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Article 29," Parliament of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, accessed August 24, 2010, <http://www.ethiobar.net/>.

⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Analysis of Ethiopia's Draft Anti-Terrorism Law* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009), <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/06/30/analysis-ethiopia-s-draft-anti-terrorism-law>.

⁶⁶ "Freedom of the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation No. 590/2008," *Federal Negarit Gazeta* No. 64, December 4, 2008.

In 2012, specific legal restrictions on ICT use and provision were enacted with the passage of the Telecom Fraud Offences law in September,⁶⁷ which revised a 2002 law that had placed bans on certain advanced communication applications, such as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP)—including Skype and Google Voice—call back services, and internet-based fax services.⁶⁸ Under the new law, the penalties under the preexisting ban were toughened, increasing the fine and maximum prison sentence from five to eight years for offending service providers and penalizing users with three months to two years in prison.⁶⁹ The government first instituted the ban on VoIP in 2002 after it gained popularity as a less expensive means of communication and began draining revenue from the traditional telephone business belonging to the state-owned Ethio Telecom.⁷⁰ Despite the restriction on paper, many cybercafés still offer the banned service with no reports of repercussions to date.

The new law also added the requirement for all individuals to register their telecommunications equipment—including smart phones—with the government, which security officials enforce by confiscating ICT equipment when a registration permit cannot be furnished at security checkpoints. Most alarmingly, the Telecom Fraud Offences law extended the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Proclamation and 2004 Criminal Code to electronic communications.⁷¹ Under the anti-terrorism legislation, the publication of a statement that is understood as a direct or indirect encouragement of terrorism, broadly defined, is punishable with up to 20 years in prison.⁷² Meanwhile, the criminal code holds any “author, originator or publisher” criminally liable for content allegedly linked to offenses such as treason, espionage, or incitement, which carries with it the penalty of up to life imprisonment or death.⁷³ The criminal code also penalizes the publication of a “false rumor” with up to three years in prison.⁷⁴

In July 2012, the criminal code was applied to digital communication under the Telecom Fraud Offences law for the first time when Ethiopian Muslim Jemal Kedir was found guilty on charges of spreading false rumors and fomenting hatred through text messages. Comprised of various statements protesting against police mistreatment of the Muslim community, the text messages were used as evidence against Kedir in court, leading to a one-year prison sentence.⁷⁵

⁶⁷ “A Proclamation on Telecom Fraud Offence,” *Federal Negarit Gazeta* No. 61, September 4, 2012, <http://www.abysinnialaw.com/uploads/761.pdf>.

⁶⁸ Ethiopian Telecommunication Agency, “Telecommunication Proclamation No. 281/2002, Article 2(11) and 2(12),” July 2, 2002, accessed July 25, 2012, [http://www.eta.gov.et/Scan/Telecom%20Proc%20281_2002%20\(amendment\)%20NG.pdf](http://www.eta.gov.et/Scan/Telecom%20Proc%20281_2002%20(amendment)%20NG.pdf). As an amendment to article 24 of the Proclamation, the Sub-Article (3) specifically states, “The use or provision of voice communication or fax services through the internet are prohibited” (page 1782).

⁶⁹ “A Proclamation on Telecom Fraud Offence.”

⁷⁰ Groum Abate, “Internet Cafes Start Registering Users,” *Capital*, December 25, 2006, http://www.capitalethiopia.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=259:internet-cafes-start-registering-users-&catid=12:local-news&Itemid=4.

⁷¹ Article 19, “Ethiopia: Proclamation on Telecom Fraud Offences.”

⁷² “Anti-Terrorism Proclamation No. 652/2009,” *Federal Negarit Gazeta* No. 57, August 28, 2009.

⁷³ International Labour Organization, “The Criminal Code of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Proclamation No. 414/2004, Article 44,” <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/70993/75092/F1429731028/ETH70993.pdf>.

⁷⁴ “The Criminal Code of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.”

⁷⁵ “Ethiopian Man Jailed for One Year for Inciting Public Disorder Using Text Messages,” *Sodere*, October 1, 2012, <http://sodere.com/profiles/blogs/ethiopian-man-jailed-for-one-year-for-inciting-public-disorder>.

Also in July 2012, the well-known dissident blogger Eskinder Nega was found guilty under the anti-terrorism law and sentenced to 18 years in prison for his alleged links to a terrorist group.⁷⁶ Such trumped-up charges were based on an online column Nega had published that criticized the government's use of the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation to silence political dissent and called for greater political freedom in Ethiopia, which led to his arrest in September 2011.⁷⁷ Nega appealed the verdict at the Federal Supreme Court in early 2013,⁷⁸ but his 18-year sentence was upheld on May 2, 2013 amid global observance of World Press Freedom Day.⁷⁹

In another incident in April 2013, a student at the Addis Ababa University's Information Technology Department was arrested and charged with criminal defamation for his Facebook activity. The 21-year-old, Manyazewal Eshetu, was detained from his home in Addis Ababa after he had posted a comment on his Facebook page that criticized the "rampant corruption" of another local university in Arba Minch town, where he was transported after his arrest. At the end of the coverage period, he remained in prison and had not been prosecuted.⁸⁰

Given the high degree of online repression in Ethiopia, some political commentators use proxy servers and anonymizing tools to hide their identities when publishing online and to circumvent filtering, though the ability to communicate anonymously has become more difficult in the past year. As discussed above, the Tor Network anonymizing tool was blocked in May 2012, confirming that the government has deployed deep-packet inspection technology, and Google searches of the term "proxy" mysteriously yield no results (see "Limits on Content").

Anonymity is further compromised by SIM card registration requirements, which involve the need for consumers to provide their full names, addresses, and government-issued identification numbers upon the purchase of a mobile phone. Internet subscribers are also required to register their personal details, including their home address, with the government. In early 2013, an insider leaked worrying details of potential government efforts to draft legislation that seeks to mandate real-name registration for all internet use in Ethiopia.⁸¹

Government surveillance of online and mobile phone communications is a major concern in Ethiopia, and evidence is emerging regarding the scale of such practices. Increasing Chinese investment in Ethiopia's telecommunications sector over the past few years has led to reports of the government using Chinese technology to monitor phone lines and various types of online

⁷⁶ Nega is also the 2011 recipient of the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award. Sarah Hoffman, "That Bravest and Most Admirable of Writers: PEN Salutes Eskinder Nega," PEN American Center (blog), April 13, 2012, <http://www.pen.org/blog/?p=11198>. See also, Markos Lemma, "Ethiopia: Online Reactions to Prison Sentence for Dissident Blogger," *Global Voices*, July 15, 2012, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/07/15/ethiopia-online-reactions-to-prison-sentence-for-dissident-blogger/>.

⁷⁷ Endalk, "Ethiopia: Freedom of Expression in Jeopardy," *Global Voices*, February 3, 2012, <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2012/02/03/ethiopia-freedom-of-expression-in-jeopardy/>.

⁷⁸ "Ethiopia Delays Appeal of Jailed Blogger," *Africa Review*, December 19, 2012, <http://www.africareview.com/News/Ethiopia-delays-appeal-of-jailed-blogger/-/979180/1647624/-/mm610r/-/index.html>.

⁷⁹ "Eskinder Nega's 18-Year Sentence Upheld," PEN America Blog, May 13, 2013, <http://worldvoices.pen.org/rapid-action/2013/05/14/eskinder-negas-18-year-sentence-upheld-four-other-journalists-remain>

⁸⁰ "Student Arrested for Facebook Post," *Addis Journal*, April 3, 2013, <http://arefe.wordpress.com/2013/04/03/student-arrested-for-facebook-post/>.

⁸¹ Interview conducted by Freedom House consultant..

communication.⁸² Fears of direct assistance from China were affirmed in June 2012 when the Ethiopian government openly held an “Internet Management” media workshop with support from the Chinese Communist Party,⁸³ and spearheaded by a professor from the Chinese Leadership Academy.⁸⁴ According to an official government press release, the main purpose of the workshop was to learn about China’s experience regarding “mass media capacity building,” “mass media institution management,” and “internet management.”

In August 2012, Ethiopia was reported to be among a group of 10 countries that possesses the commercial spyware toolkit FinFisher,⁸⁵ a device that can secretly monitor computers by turning on webcams, record everything a user types with a key logger, and intercept Skype calls. A leaked document confirmed that the UK-based company, Gamma International, had provided Ethio Telecom with the FinFisher surveillance toolkit at some point between April and July 2012.⁸⁶ In addition, research conducted by Citizen Lab in March 2013 worryingly found evidence of an Ethio Telecom-initiated FinSpy campaign launched against users that employed pictures of the opposition group, Ginbot 7, as bait.⁸⁷ The Information Network Security Agency (INSA)—which is involved in surveillance as well as content blocking⁸⁸—has also reportedly tested tools that can enable its officials to mask their identities to acquire personal information such as usernames and passwords, according to internal sources working in the industry.⁸⁹

In a series of trials of journalists and bloggers throughout 2012 and early 2013, government prosecutors have presented e-mails and phone calls intercepted from journalists as evidence.⁹⁰ For example, on January 8, 2013 the Ethiopian Court of Cassation rejected an appeal for acquittal filed by the award-winning journalist Reeyot Alemu, citing the e-mails she had received from opposition discussion groups as justification.⁹¹ Reports and photos she had sent to the U.S.-based opposition news site, Ethiopian Review, were also used against her. Alemu was imprisoned in June 2011 on a slew of charges under the anti-terrorism law and sentenced to 14 years’ imprisonment in January

⁸² Helen Epstein, “Cruel Ethiopia,” *New York Review of Books*, May 13, 2010, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/may/13/cruel-ethiopia/>.

⁸³ Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front “Workshop Conducted,” press release, June 3, 2012, http://www.eprdf.org.et/web/guest/news/-/asset_publisher/c0F7/content/3-june-2012-26-2004.

⁸⁴ Patrick Roanhouse, “Ethiopian Government Outlaws VOIP, 15-year Prison Sentences Possible,” *Betanews*, June 15, 2012, <http://betanews.com/2012/06/15/ethiopian-government-outlaws-voip-15-year-prison-sentences-possible/>.

⁸⁵ Fahmida Y. Rashid, “FinFisher ‘Lawful Interception’ Spyware Found in Ten Countries, Including the U.S.,” *Security Week*, August 8, 2012, <http://www.securityweek.com/finfisher-lawful-interception-spyware-found-ten-countries-including-us>.

⁸⁶ The document was seen by Freedom House consultant. Morgan Marquis-Boire et al., “You Only Click Twice: FinFisher’s Global Proliferation,” Citizen Lab (University of Toronto), March 13, 2013, <https://citizenlab.org/2013/03/you-only-click-twice-finfishers-global-proliferation-2/>.

⁸⁷ Marquis-Boire, “You Only Click Twice.”

⁸⁸ “Mission Statement,” Information Network Security Agency of Ethiopia, accessed June 2, 2010, <http://www.insa.gov.et/INSA/faces/welcomeJSF.jsp>.

⁸⁹ Interview with individuals working in the technology and security sector in Ethiopia, who requested to remain anonymous, January 2012.

⁹⁰ Committee to Protect Journalists, “Ethiopian Blogger, Journalists Convicted of Terrorism,” January 19, 2012, <http://cpj.org/2012/01/three-journalists-convicted-on-terrorism-charges-i.php>.

⁹¹ “Cassation Bench Rejects Reeyot’s Final Plea,” *Walta Info*, January 8, 2012, http://www.waltainfo.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6944:cassation-bench-rejects-reeyots-final-plea&catid=52:national-news&Itemid=291.

2012. An appeal court reduced her sentence to five years in August 2012; however, because the Court of Cassation is the last resort for legal appeals, no further recourse is available for acquittal.⁹²

While the government's stronghold over the Ethiopian ICT sector enables it to proactively monitor users, its access to user activity and information is less direct at cybercafes. For a period following the 2005 elections, cybercafe owners were required to keep a register of their clients, but this has not been enforced since mid-2010. Nevertheless, there are strong suspicions that cybercafes are required to install software to monitor user activity, which arose after a few incidents were reported of the authorities arresting users at internet cafes in 2011. The arrests were followed by government warnings that "visiting anti-peace websites using proxy servers is a crime."⁹³

To date, cyberattacks and other forms of technical violence have not been a serious problem in Ethiopia, partly due to the limited number of users, though the tide may be turning. In March 2013, the independent activist, Abrah Desta, reported via Twitter that his Facebook page was disabled for an unknown reason, which some observers speculated was the result of criminal hacking.⁹⁴ Harassment and intimidation of bloggers and online journalists have also increased over the past couple of years. For example, independent bloggers have reported instances of being summoned by the authorities to receive warnings against discussing certain topics online. Fortunately, there have been no instances of violence against users to date.

⁹² Committee to Protect Journalists, "Ethiopian Judge Rejects Reeyot Alemu's Final Appeal," January 8, 2013, <http://www.cpj.org/2013/01/ethiopian-judge-rejects-reeyot-alemu-final-appeal.php>.

⁹³ "TPLF Regime Arresting Internet Café Users in Addis Ababa," *Ethiopian Review*, August 12, 2011, <http://www.ethiopianreview.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=30136>.

⁹⁴ Abraha Desta, Twitter Post, March 20, 2013, 12:34am, <https://twitter.com/AbrahaDesta/status/314278873334419456>.