

Conflicting professional obligations among government journalists in Ethiopia

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Abstract

This paper presents research into journalism cultures in three large media organizations in Ethiopia, all state-owned: Ethiopian Television, Ethiopian News Agency and The Ethiopian Herald. Through a series of in-depth interviews the researcher set forth to analyse how journalists cope with the potential conflict between being a professional journalist and working for a governmental media institution. The research suggests that even if the conflict is highly evident among the journalists, they tend to adopt pragmatic strategies to even out the professional contradictions. Most journalists were found to negate any political affiliation and displayed identification with a wider journalistic community. One of the foremost reconciliation strategies was found to be self-censorship.

Acronyms

ENA	Ethiopian News Agency
EPA	Ethiopian Press Agency (publisher of <i>Ethiopian Herald</i> and other publications)
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (ruling party in Ethiopia since 1991)
ERTA	Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency
ETV	Ethiopian Television (section of ERTA)
UNMEE	United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (also name on a group of journalists in ERTA)

Most journalists in Ethiopia work in the state-owned media. Of the estimated 1700 practising journalists in the country, 1300 are employed by the state media in some form. The largest institution, Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency (ERTA), employs 512 journalists in television and 560 in radio (Desta, 2007). Ethiopian News Agency has 125 journalists in total (Teshome, 2007: 1), and the four newspapers published by the state-owned Ethiopian Press Agency (*Ethiopian Herald*, *Addis Zemen*, *Berissa* and *Al-alem*) employ approximately 120 journalists (Nebiyu, 2008: 27f). The journalism community in Ethiopia, like in many other African countries, could then (somewhat provocatively) be said to comprise of mainly 'government workers'.

However, when talking to journalists, it soon becomes clear that they are uncomfortable defining themselves as government employees. They generally view themselves as belonging to a professional occupation distinct from the government constituency, although they acknowledge the challenges and infringements which follow when they work for state-owned media institutions.

The purpose of this research is to get under the surface of journalism cultures in three Ethiopian state media institutions and map the conflict that exists between professional journalism ideals and ownership expectations. The research concentrates on the views and experiences of journalists. Content analysis, audience perceptions and so forth are not dealt with. 34 journalists – both reporters and editors – were interviewed in depth from November 2007 to May 2008. 18 come from Ethiopian Television (ETV), 7 from Ethiopian News Agency (ENA) and 9 from the *Ethiopian Herald*. The results presented in this paper comprise the first set of findings of a PhD project which investigates the negotiation of journalism identities in the Ethiopian government media.

The paper tries first of all to pinpoint the constraints that journalists experience in the three media institutions, with a particular emphasis on constraints that are interlinked with state or government relations. Secondly, I shall try to identify how journalists react to these constraints and discuss to what extent they negotiate their professional identity in a response to the limitations. Thirdly, I ask whether there are contesting journalism cultures within the media institutions. As a theoretical framework to understand how questionable journalism practices are upheld I will apply Warren Breed's social control of the newsroom theory (1955), which sought to explain from a sociological perspective how journalism behaviour is adopted and persevered in the newsroom.

A remark on the nomenclature: 'State media' vs. 'government media'

The title of this paper uses the term 'government journalists', but I should rush to say that it is a discussable phrase. The journalists – as stated above – have a dual attitude to seeing themselves as government employees, and organizationally speaking they work for the state media, not government media. The media institutions in question are owned by the state, and are accountable to the House of People's representatives (the parliament), not to the House of Ministers (the government). The boards are accordingly appointed by the parliament (Desta, 2007: 59; Gebremedhin, 2006: 10). Nevertheless, the journalists almost consistently use the term 'government media', except for a few cases when they refer to the 'state-owned media'. This may be out of custom, but at the same time it reflects a political situation where the state is frequently equated with the government of the day.

Formally speaking, the preferred phrase is 'state-owned media'; alternatively 'government-run media' if one wishes to emphasize the operational nature of the institution – and that is often the case. As such, it can be justified both to speak about the 'state media' and the 'government media' in short forms.

An influential state media

The major media institutions in Ethiopia have always been state-owned. ERTA was established during Emperor Haile Selassie's reign and dates back to 1935 on the radio side and 1964 on the television side. It continued to be actively used as the official broadcaster by the communist Dergue regime 1974–1991. The current editorial policy from 2005 (only in Amharic) expresses that it is a government media institution, and its primary function is to serve the public.

'Serving the public' is also a key phrase in the editorial policies of Ethiopian News Agency (ENA) and *Ethiopian Herald*. Established in 1942, ENA claims to be the oldest wire service still in operation in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is a major source of information for the Ethiopian government media, but also for foreign media outlets through exchange agreements, such as Reuters and AFP. *Ethiopian Herald* is the government's English medium newspaper and is printed daily in 9,930 copies (Ministry of Information, April 2008). It is scarcely circulated outside of the capital city Addis Ababa, but is distributed to for instance foreign embassies and is as such thought to reach many decision-makers and stakeholders.

These three media institutions were selected for the study because they are among the most influential media institutions in Ethiopia and because they employ a considerable amount of journalists.

“Journalism is in my blood”

Many journalists in the Ethiopian state media seem to have professional ambitions, at least at the stage when they join the institution. They typically express creative aspirations such as a desire to enhance writing or reporting skills, and they display a journalistic mindset when being queried about the normative values of journalism. Several of them speak about a ‘dream’ that they had in their youth to become writers or reporters. Some mention names of local journalists that they view as role models. Two of the informants give a list of seven reporters from ETV that they regarded as role models when they were young, including Habtamu Bekele, “the best documentary producer ever”. However, the seven journalists have either passed away, gone to the US or been removed to less visible positions in the state broadcaster. The two informants express with sadness that the environment in ETV is less conducive for good journalism today than a few years ago.

“Journalism is in my blood,” says one informant. He has worked as reporter and senior reporter in *Ethiopian Herald* for six years. The aspiration to become a journalist was planted in him as a child when he listened to the local radio. He took journalism courses as part of his undergraduate degree in English Language and Literature and was lucky to be employed as a reporter in *Ethiopian Herald*. The job would give him an opportunity to meet with journalists from different parts of the world. Disappointments appeared very soon, however. He expected to work with state-of-the-art equipment in the newspaper house that was supposed to “depict the image of Ethiopia”, only to be introduced to a newsroom that hardly had any computers at all. And, “the human structure was very weak”.

The lack of proper technical equipment is mentioned by many informants as a major source of dissatisfaction. Human capacity challenges and poor salary likewise¹. An equally important reason for dissatisfaction for the informant from *Ethiopian Herald* is that he feels that his journalistic competence has been at a standstill since he joined the institution. “Your life is not changing while your friends change, get family.” He now has an MA degree in journalism from the university, but feels there is no room to use his potential in *Herald*. Rather than contributing to good journalism, he sometimes feels that he is “killing it”.

The feeling of being curtailed in the profession is evident with many of the informants. They typically express a self-imagery where they view themselves as capable

¹ This coincides with Amanuel Gebru’s findings which point to low job satisfaction among journalists in ERTA, ENA and EPA (Ethiopian Press Agency). Through a survey approach, he concluded that 89.6% of the journalists were ‘dissatisfied’ with their work situation and 2.2% were ‘very dissatisfied’ (Amanuel, 2006).

journalists and potentially good reporters, but are somehow stifled by institutional constraints.

Unwritten expectations

As the journalists enter the state media houses, usually as junior reporters, they learn how to execute their journalistic duties to the satisfaction of their superiors. After a while they will have a notion of what is expected of them as reporters, and eventually as editors on different levels in the organization. But where do the expectations come from?

The informants invariably refer to the editorial policy as a source where the intentions of the media organization are stated. They seem however to have modest knowledge of the contents of the policy document. Some informants claim to have been informed of the policy during the first few weeks in the organization, while one editor from ETV says he had to look it up by himself. When asked about the contents of the editorial policy, a senior editor with 10 years of experience in ETV has this to say:

I'm aware of it. It is pro-government. It assumes you only work in favour of the government. You can't present any negative news about the government. You can present some negative news about the woredas and kebeles [city and suburb administrative levels], however. (ETV senior editor, Amharic news desk, November 2007)

The fact, nonetheless, is that the editorial policy – which is largely the same for ETV, ENA and Ethiopian Press Agency/*Ethiopian Herald* (2005, 2003, 2003) – does not instruct journalists to report positively or negatively on the government or other political constellations; on the contrary, it commands journalists to report objectively, balanced and truthfully.

The expectations that reporters and editors sense in terms of how to cover the news are rather unwritten entities. They have been established in the news organizations throughout the years and are reinforced as they are handed over to new generations of senior reporters, deputy editors, etc. The expectations seem also to be imposed by outside milieus, particularly the political surroundings. Politicians from the ruling party EPRDF probably represent a major incentive to cement the tradition of uncritical reporting on the government. Journalists who have tried to report critically on the government give the impression that they have broken some kind of rules within the media organization.

A senior editor from the English department in ETV tells of an incident where he reported on the draft press law from 2003 which had been criticized by the international media community. The then information minister Bereket Simon invited international

representatives to Ethiopia and tried to convince them that the press law was upright, but was not successful. All representatives that spoke to ETV were critical. The reporter used the sound bite “The draft press law is restrictive” in the presentation on the evening news. Two days after he was called to the minister’s office, which is in the same building as ETV.

He tried to be furious at me, but I was really confident. I didn’t lose eye contact with him. He was surprised. “Why did you do that?” he said. “I tried to balance the story. They all believed it [the press law] was restrictive. I had to air their views. I balanced the story,” I said. He really started to argue. “This is not an issue of balance. It is the government media, so you have to promote us!” he said. (ETV senior editor, English news desk, November 2007)

This incident illustrates how the perception of ETV as a mouthpiece for the government is well established in the public offices. Even if the editorial policy demands balance in reporting, the journalist is prompted to compromise when he is caught in the conflict between professional standards and expectations from the owner. The incident also illustrates how professional ethics are indeed present among journalists in the state media, although it is sometimes a courageous task to live by these ethics.

What one observes is a news organization where there is a discrepancy between the formal editorial policy and the execution of the policy, which may not be that different from the situation in many long-established media houses in the West after all. The knowledge of the editorial policy may not be that sound in many media houses throughout the world (cf. Dahlström, 2007), but it is further weakened in a government media context because of the lack of supportive discourses.

Adopting unaccommodating journalism habits

In his classic social control of the newsroom theory from 1955, Warren Breed suggests that news production is governed by a complex set of social factors and that journalists are adopted into an established news production culture as they enter the particular organization. Breed argues that the socialization process in the newsroom is usually covert and that the adoption of routine behaviour results in cultural patterns that can be traced in the newsrooms. On the basis of studies in American newsrooms, Breed concluded that the socialization of journalistic conduct was “insufficient for wider democratic needs” (Breed, 1955).

The interviews with journalists from Ethiopian news organizations suggest that reporters and editors adopt routine behaviour that frequently collides with their view of professional journalism standards. Characteristically, the informants will indicate that the

adoption of the state media's way of doing journalism comes naturally as they enter the organization. Several informants recall an initiation period of a few weeks when they were tutored by older journalists. One informant who has climbed the ranks in ETV explains how new journalists are introduced to the organization:

On the first day in the station, they don't even try to let you know how ETV works. You just learn from seniors, from colleagues. They attach you to a senior reporter and you'll go with him for a week. The coming week you go alone. [...] When you do something wrong, something that is against the editorial policy, only then do you read the editorial policy. (ETV programme department head, November 2007)

The trainee period in *Ethiopian Herald* is similar, according to one informant who has had various reporter and editorial positions in the newspaper and in ENA:

When you start, you will be given stories to read. For some weeks, months, they simply tell you to read. It gives you an idea on how stories are written. You follow their steps. (*Ethiopian Herald* editor, November 2007)

Interestingly, of course, both these informants have later become tutors for new junior reporters who come into the organization, hence the routines are reproduced and arguably reinforced.

The emphasis in Breed's theory is on the unwritten conventions that reside in the newsroom as a response to the demands that the journalists envisage. The theory is less optimistic about the potential of the individual journalist to shape the content according to professional standards. The theory is challenged by Gaye Tuchman (1978), who puts more emphasis on the autonomy of the journalists². Even if there are internal and external constraints, the individual journalist has much influence in the decision-making processes in the news production, he contends. Tuchman's argument, however, must be seen in light of the news culture where he conducted his research, namely in American newsrooms which generally encourage independence and pluralism of the media although pressure from for instance a business point-of-view is prevalent.

In the Ethiopian state media context, journalists are not only members of a journalistic community, but of a society where the government is assumed an active role in almost all facets of public life. This may be one of the reasons why the journalists continue to work in a media institution where the government has a certain control of the content, although they fervently disagree with the model from a professional perspective. Hence, one can detect both a socialization process into the state media culture and simultaneously see that the

² Herbert Gans (1979) could also be mentioned as a theorician who challenges Breed on this point.

journalists uphold their normative view on how journalism should be performed if the environment was conducive.

Justifying the practices

All 34 informants for this study were found to be critical to the operations of the government media for professional reasons. At the same time, many of them balance the picture by mentioning qualities in the media organizations that coincide with their view of good journalism. Perhaps most importantly on the reporting level, they reject that the media organizations convey direct falsehood. “We don’t lie, by the way,” says one informant from ETV. Then he adds: “But we hide facts.” He could probably not live with a situation where the broadcaster transmitted falsehood, but to for instance disallow criticism from the opposition to be aired could be justified as a practice within the legroom of editing.

Two informants, one from ETV and one from ENA, refer to an exceptional situation prior to the 2005 national elections where the opposition held a rally on Meskel Square in downtown Addis Ababa. The number of participants were thought to be up to 2 million, while the state media reported the number as between 1.2 and 1.5 million. This is used by the informants as examples of direct falsehood reported by the state media, but the distortion must be said to be less significant and the incident actually demonstrates that the factual information conveyed by the state media is likely to be correct, although sometimes deficient. In the words of one informant from *Ethiopian Herald* who was asked if they sometimes publish lies: “No, actually not. But we quote official sources.” The pragmatic strategies employed by the journalists to get around the constraints while at the same time staying within the boundaries of acceptable journalism practices indeed demonstrate how the ethical room in journalism can be quite accommodating.

A few informants express that the idea of a responsible state media is not bad. One editor in ETV had the opportunity to go to China for two months to receive further training.

I had the opportunity to see how important good media are. All media in China are government-owned, of course, but they are good. They take part in shaping the society, contributing to development, international relations, moral issues. I could see how development journalism³ can contribute. If the institution conducts good journalism, it is possible for

³ The idea of development journalism is firmly planted on management level in ETV. Seifu Seyum, programme departments’ head of ETV and one of the central leaders in the institution, refers to development journalism when being asked about his view of good journalism: “Good journalism should reflect the reality of society. That is the philosophy of development journalism. Fairness. Respecting and serving the public” (personal interview, November 2007).

government media to be good. (ETV editor of social-related programmes, April 2008)

Several informants argue that the private media in Ethiopia – which currently consist of 58 independent newspapers and two radio stations – are no better than the state-owned media when it comes to values like objectivity and fairness in reporting. Dejene Tesemma, editor-in-chief of *Ethiopian Herald*, says there are two extremes in the Ethiopian media: The government media and the private media. “The government media focus on the government, while the private media also serve certain groups” (personal interview, November 2007). A senior editor in ETV, otherwise very critical to the government linkages in the state broadcaster, contends that the state media are after all better than the private media because the former have a diversity of journalists within their ranks – there are both journalists who are for the ruling party, against, and neutral. Private media outlets, on the other hand, are either for or (for the most part) fiercely against the government.

Politically detached

Independence from political affiliation stands forth as a core value of ‘good journalism’ in the view of journalists in the Ethiopian state media. Both individual journalists and the media institutions at large should be politically detached, according to the informants. Several of them state that it is impossible to carry a party membership when you are a journalist because you will always be lenient towards the party you support. All this points towards a fourth estate understanding of the media.

The informants differ somewhat in their answers when asked about how many journalists in the Ethiopian state media are actually party-affiliated. The majority assumes that there are very few party members among regular reporters and editors, but many within the management. This seems likely given the employment process in the organizations, which appears to be largely merit-based with an extensive exam and a practically-oriented interview as the core elements. One senior editor in the Oromo department in ETV, who expresses much worry with the government inclination of the station, estimates that there are 30-35% journalists with party membership, but most other informants would contest such a high proportion.

For tactical reasons the researcher would not ask the informants whether they are members of a political party, but many would still make it a point to say that they are not members. This suggests that they regard it as important to be perceived as independent to be

taken seriously as journalists, and it shows a due respect for journalism as a profession which they want to be identified with.

Labelling the colleagues

A peculiar phenomenon in ERTA (Ethiopian Radio and Television Agency) is a group of journalists who according to the informants suddenly appeared in the institution some months before the national elections in May 2005. These journalists became the talk of the day among the rest of the journalism body as they were believed to have been placed in the media by the government for political purposes. They were sarcastically labelled 'UNMEEs', after the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The suggestion is that these journalists, like the military intervention force on the Horn of Africa, is a peace-keeping force to calm down the tensions between the journalists and the management in radio and TV.

There are many rumours about the UNMEEs among the other reporters and editors. One informant claims they come from the Amhara region. Another says 2-3 different regions in the northern part of the country. An acting newsroom head in ETV says many journalists fear them: "We don't eat together or have coffee together. We fear that if we speak to them, we will face job insecurity." A deputy editor-in-chief has observed that the UNMEEs have their own meetings: "On Saturdays, I think. They will not come to the office then."

It is not the purpose of this paper to reveal the truth about the UNMEEs. What the phenomenon shows, however, is the high level of uncertainty among the journalists in the Ethiopian state media. They view their organization as a site for political contestation where journalists are sometimes hired, fired and promoted for reasons other than professional.

Rumours are rife not only with the UNMEEs, but with named journalists as well. Some informants would confidently give the researcher information about the political inclination of certain journalists. One deputy editor-in-chief, whom I had been told was a member of the ruling party EPRDF, denied any membership and appeared highly critical to journalists who had political affiliation. After I turned off the recorder, he gave me a warning in confidence: "People will not tell you whether they're party-affiliated, so you have to be careful."

Self-censorship

Of the three media institutions under scrutiny, *Ethiopian Herald* seems to enjoy more political liberty than ETV and ENA. This may be because as a newspaper it is more likely to be compared with the private media outlets, and the *Herald* is after all an English-language

newspaper with very limited circulation among the Ethiopian public. It may also be that *Ethiopian Herald* is partly aimed at the international community and as such is a minor showcase towards the outside world. However, this is contested by the fact that the Amharic sister paper to *Ethiopian Herald*, *Addis Zemen*, also appears to cater for a freer journalistic community than ETV and ENA. The editor-in-chief of *Ethiopian Herald*, who sarcastically calls his newspaper a “mere government office”, claims that there is not a single party member in his publication. In the state broadcasting, however, he says there are “a lot of cadres”.

The editor-in-chief of *Ethiopian Herald* conveys the impression that he demands high journalistic quality in the articles published, such as verifying facts and telling the truth. He openly admits, however, that his publication is a government outlet and that people read it as such. He has still allowed himself on a few occasions to be critical towards the government in his commentaries on page 3, and has not received any negative feedback for that.

The general attitude from the journalists, however, is that they refrain from critical coverage or commentaries on the government because they “know what type of reactions to expect”. The informants express that this is part of the adaptation process as they learn how to write and report in the government media. They develop a gut feeling which helps them to edit and select the news in ways that make it less controversial for both owners and audience. The editing and news selection are actually not primarily aimed at promoting the government directly, but used to prevent conflict and give the impression of national progress. Criticism of the government and public offices is therefore avoided, but also other types of criticism or disturbances will be downplayed. When trying to explain how the editing is performed, one editor with background from radio and TV refers to “unwritten rules”. He says they are not used intentionally, it “just happens”.

Self-censorship is particularly prevalent in sensitive political stories, and especially during election times. Many informants refer to the national elections in 2005 as a time when they had to be particularly careful. The management, which usually keeps out of the daily news production, would get more directly involved in the news-making process. Informants tell about phone calls from the general manager to the editors in high positions. The editorial conference will also consult the management if there are stories which are seen as controversial and potentially harmful.

The pressure is “indirect”, says a senior editor from *Ethiopian Herald*. He does not receive any instructions from the upper management directly, but will hear them through his

immediate superiors. Self-censorship is thus executed on many levels in the organization, from the editor-in-chief, through his deputies and down to the reporters' level. A senior reporter indicates that even the official who is interviewed will execute some type of self-censorship by filtering the information according to government expectations. We thus may speak of a news dissemination process which is permeated by self-moderation; it is a culture of self-censorship. Supporting this, Nebiyu Yonas (2008) documents widespread self-censorship practices in ENA, *Ethiopian Herald* and *Addis Zemen*. However, he also found that there were different ideas among the journalists of what censorship meant, and many of them would view it as a type of editing.

Self-censorship practices infringe on the dynamics of news production and dispose of the unexpected. The result is many times news reports which are predictable and uninteresting to the viewers/readers. The news is staged. Not only is the news staged; the pre-production of the news is sometimes staged as well. Informants tell about ministerial press conferences where reporters are given lists of pre-made questions from the editors. The questions were sent out by the ministry in the first place. A reporter from *Ethiopian Herald* recalls an episode where he came to a press conference in the Ministry of Transport, only to experience that the ETV reporter had already asked his questions. To save the situation the *Herald* reporter made up his own questions and posed them to the minister. The minister was taken by surprise that someone was not following the manuscript. "I could read from his face that he was not happy," says the reporter.

Discourses of retribution

The journalists typically explain self-censorship practices by referring to fear of retribution if they forward critical stories about the government. I ask them what kind of retribution they fear. The answer is usually losing their job or getting a salary deduction. This, however, has hardly happened to any of the informants. Has it happened to anybody else in the news organization, I ask. "Oh, yes." When I continue along that line and ask them to be more specific, they typically get hesitant. It turns out that getting specific information about incidents of retribution is difficult.

An editor from ENA could inform me that "a lot of journalists in the organization had been fired because of their beliefs". When being asked to tell more about the ENA journalists who were fired, he moderates himself:

Uhm. In terms of the journalists, the organization doesn't react like that. Sometimes they penalize a few. I think one or two during the elections [were penalized]. When it

comes to firing, it doesn't apply directly. (Script editor for radio and TV programmes in ENA, January 2008)

Warning letters are another form of retribution that is mentioned by several of the informants (although only experienced by one), but one senior editor in ETV points out that oral warnings are more significant. The warnings will carry a message of potential retribution if the incident recurs and serve to manifest the institutional expectations to the journalists.

The actual incidents of retribution seem to be few, but the discourses of retribution are many. The persistent talk of retribution and penalties among the journalists probably contributes to cementing an editorial culture which stimulates journalists to be on the safe side rather than challenging the status quo.

Concluding remarks

Journalists in the Ethiopian state media speak openly about the tensions between their professional identity and their situation as employees of the government media. They are generally critical to the political inclination of the media institution, although some believe that a state media institution could have the potential to cater for responsible reporting and contribute to stability in the country. To reconcile the conflict between professionalism and proprietorship the journalists adopt different strategies such as taking advantage of the elasticity that editing gives and executing self-censorship. However, the conflict sometimes causes distress on a personal level, like expressed by a former editor in *Ethiopian Herald*: "I felt that I did something wrong. We were not practicing journalism."

It is suggested that the commonly felt dissatisfaction in the state media creates a certain unity among the journalists, which in turn arguably makes it easier for the individual journalist to remain in the organization. The study has at the same time identified different groups or communities of journalists in the three media houses under scrutiny. The three major identification factors for the journalists are found to be professional identity, political affiliation and to some extent ethnicity. Professional identity largely serves as an adhesive for the journalism community, while political inclination and ethnicity are subject to much rumouring and some contestation in the media organizations.

Warren Breed's theory of social control in the newsroom (1955) seems relevant to comprehend how journalists are socialized into a semi-professional culture in the Ethiopian state media and how they adopt editing practices which are after all partly in conflict with the editorial policies of the organizations. However, the six areas that Breed identifies as the

factors for social control in the newsroom (power of institutional power and sanctions; feelings of obligation and esteem for superiors; mobility aspirations; absence of competing group allegiance; the pleasant nature of reporting activity; and the fact that news becomes a value and a continuing challenge for journalists) largely assume a news organization where a central journalistic value like independence from political affiliation is shared by both journalists and owners. The situation for workers in the media houses in Ethiopia appears somewhat more complex, if one will. It is therefore argued that there is a need for a more comprehensive theory of socialization into news cultures which is applicable also for societies where the fourth estate is not fully detached from the other estates.

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