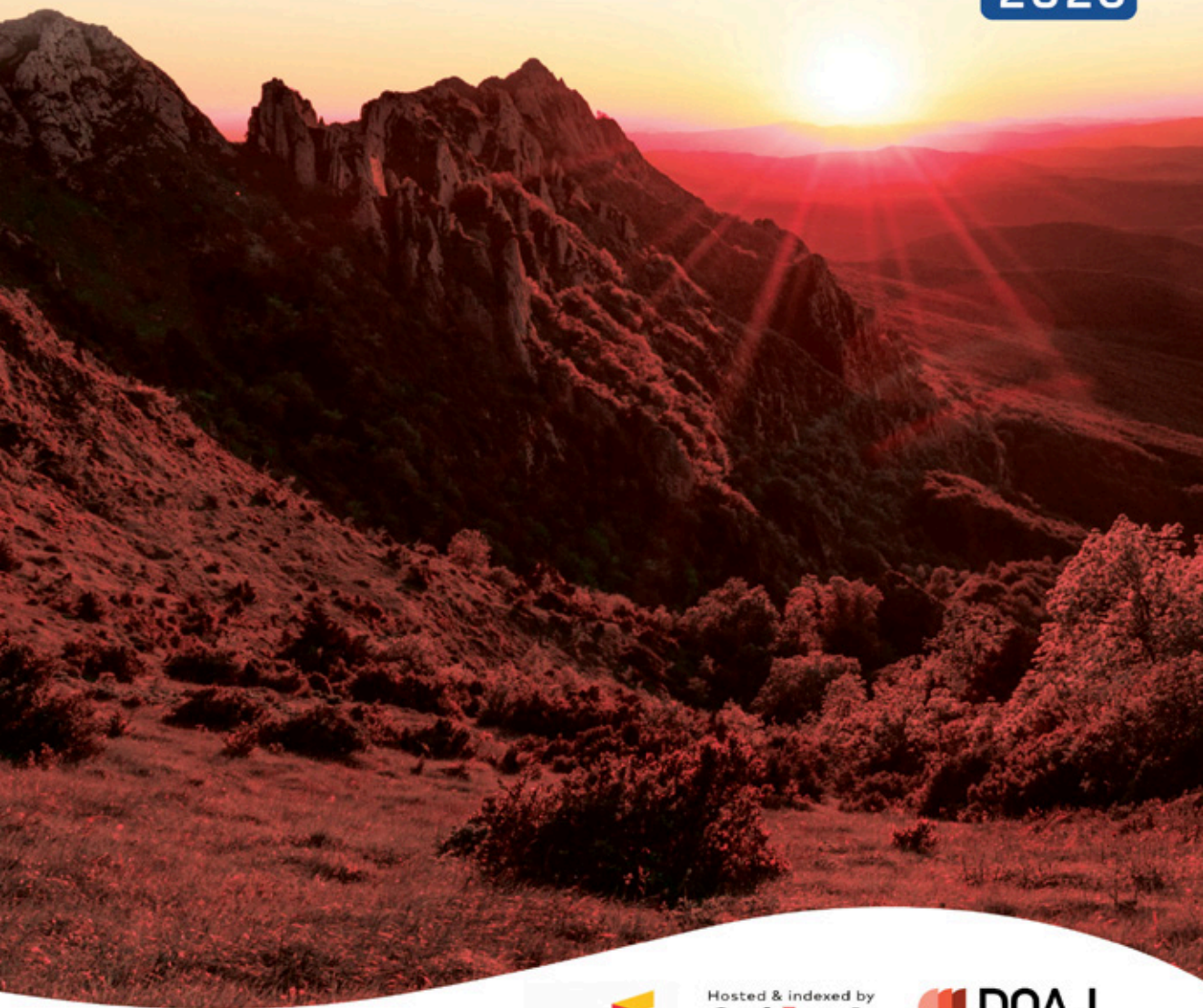


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Government Public Relations in Ethiopia: Historical Pathways from Imperial Rule to the Digital Era

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of Ethiopian government public relations (GPR) across four distinct political epochs: the Imperial era under Emperor Haile Selassie (1931–1974), the Socialist transformation of the Derg regime (1974–1991), the Federalist experiment of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (1991–2018), and the contemporary period of digital disruption under the Prosperity Party (PP) (2018–present). Through an analysis of these historical phases, the study demonstrates how changing political systems have shaped government communication strategies, institutional practices, and public engagement mechanisms. Employing a qualitative historical research design, the study draws on government documents, media archives, and relevant secondary literature to trace the institutional development and transformation of government public relations in Ethiopia. The findings suggest that the trajectory of Ethiopian government public relations does not reflect a linear progression towards communicative modernisation. Rather, it reveals recurring patterns of adaptive repression and developmental authoritarianism. Successive governments have consistently employed public relations as an instrument for consolidating and maintaining political power, often at the expense of genuine democratic engagement and citizen participation. Furthermore, persistent structural challenges, including limited transparency, restricted media freedom, weak institutional accountability, and low levels of digital literacy, have constrained meaningful communication reform. Nevertheless, the historical trajectory indicates a gradual transition from highly centralised and authoritarian communication models towards aspirations for more participatory, responsive, and digitally enabled approaches. The study concludes that fostering inclusive governance in Ethiopia's digital era requires significant investment in both scholarly research and professional practice in government public relations, alongside broader reforms that promote transparency, media pluralism, and meaningful citizen engagement.

Keywords: Ethiopian, Public relations, Government Public relations, Imperial, Digital age

Introduction

Public relations (PR) has evolved considerably as both a professional practice and an academic discipline, continually adapting to changing social, technological, economic, and political environments. In one of the most influential and enduring definitions, Grunig and Hunt (1984) conceptualised public relations as a management function responsible for establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics. This understanding continues to underpin contemporary scholarship, although recent studies have increasingly emphasised the strategic, relational, and digitally mediated nature of public relations in complex governance environments (Johnston & Lane, 2023; Macnamara, 2022; Valentini, 2021). Contemporary public relations is, therefore, viewed not merely as information dissemination but as a strategic communication process that facilitates stakeholder engagement, relationship management, trust building, and organisational legitimacy (Johnston & Lane, 2023; Macnamara, 2022).

Within the public sector, government public relations (GPR) performs a similarly critical role by facilitating public discourse, communicating government policies and programmes, managing citizen expectations, and fostering mutual understanding between governments and the populations they serve (Edwards, 2018; Tola, 2017). Recent scholarship further argues that government public relations has become increasingly important in promoting transparency, citizen participation, policy legitimacy, and public trust, particularly within rapidly evolving digital communication environments (Kim & Krishna, 2022; Liu & Horsley, 2023; Wæraas & Ihlen, 2024). As governments operate within networked and information-intensive societies, GPR has expanded beyond traditional information management to encompass stakeholder dialogue, reputation governance, crisis communication, and strategic engagement aimed at strengthening democratic governance and enhancing state–citizen relationships (Liu & Horsley, 2023; Wæraas & Ihlen, 2024). Despite the growing importance of government communication, scholarly research on public relations in many non-Western contexts remains limited.

In Ethiopia, the relative underdevelopment of PR scholarship has constrained both theoretical and practical understanding of the field. Existing studies examine selected dimensions of government PR and communication practices (Alemnew, 2019; Gezihagne, 2018; Molla, 2021; Tola, 2017; Woldeyes, 2018). However, these studies tend to focus on specific institutions, historical periods,

or communication functions, leaving significant gaps in understanding the broader historical evolution of government public relations and the challenges confronting the field in contemporary Ethiopia.

In a culturally and linguistically diverse society such as Ethiopia, GPR promotes national cohesion, fostering tolerance among the country's diverse nations and nationalities, and cultivating public awareness of shared national objectives (Alemnew, 2019; Tola, 2017; Woldeyes, 2018). Beyond domestic responsibilities, government communication also contributes to projecting Ethiopia's image internationally and strengthening diplomatic relations with neighbouring states and the wider global community (Alemnew, 2019; Woldeyes, 2018). Nevertheless, much of the existing literature overlooks the interconnectedness between Ethiopia's historical experiences and the contemporary communication challenges emerging from digital transformation. As a result, the historical foundations of GPR remain insufficiently integrated into current analyses of governance, citizen engagement, and strategic communication.

The evolution of GPR in Ethiopia was shaped by profound political transformations, ranging from imperial governance and socialist rule to ethnic federalism and contemporary political reform efforts. Throughout these periods, communication practices have undergone significant institutional and technological changes while simultaneously facing persistent constraints. Government control of information, propaganda traditions, limited media autonomy, and public scepticism have often restricted the development of transparent and participatory communication systems (Chala, 2023; Woldeyes, 2018). Although GPR has played a central role in state-building and political legitimacy, scholarly attention to its historical development remains limited.

Thus, understanding this historical trajectory is important as Ethiopia navigates the digital communication environment. Examining the evolution of government PR provides valuable insights into how successive governments have managed public discourse, sought political legitimacy, communicated policy objectives, and engaged, or failed to engage, with citizens. Such historical understanding is essential for addressing contemporary communication challenges and for designing more inclusive, transparent, and responsive governance systems. Accordingly, there is a need for a more comprehensive analysis of the Ethiopian GPR that integrates both its historical foundations and its contemporary realities.

This knowledge gap is especially significant within the expanding field of Global South communication studies, which challenges the dominance of Euro-American theoretical frameworks in explaining political communication and public relations in postcolonial societies. Recent scholarship has called for greater engagement with indigenous, African, Asian, and other non-Western communication traditions to develop more contextually grounded understandings of communication processes and governance practices (Matrizes, 2024). Responding to this call, the present study situates Ethiopian GPR within broader debates on state communication, digital governance, and digital sovereignty in the Global South. In doing so, it contributes to emerging discussions concerning how developing nations and new geopolitical alliances are reshaping state–citizen communication in the digital age (Jiang & Belli, 2025).

Against this backdrop, the study presents a historical analysis of GPR in Ethiopia, tracing its evolution from the imperial era to the contemporary digital age. By examining the interaction between political change, communication systems, and technological developments, the study contributes to scholarship in communication studies, political science, public administration, and Ethiopian studies. Furthermore, it provides policymakers, government communication practitioners, and development stakeholders with historical insights that may inform the design of communication strategies aimed at enhancing transparency, citizen participation, and democratic governance. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how historical communication practices continue to shape contemporary public relations challenges, state legitimacy, nation-building processes, and broader development trajectories in Ethiopia.

Thus, the primary objective of this study is to examine the historical development of government public relations in Ethiopia from the Imperial era under Emperor Haile Selassie to the contemporary digital communication age. Specifically, the study explores how shifts in political regimes, governance structures, and communication technologies have influenced state communication practices across different historical periods. It further identifies the persistent structural and institutional challenges affecting government–public relations and evaluates opportunities for strengthening communication strategies within Ethiopia's contemporary governance framework.

Literature Review

Government public relations (GPR) constitutes a strategic communication function through which governments cultivate trust, legitimacy, and mutual understanding with citizens and other stakeholders. Beyond the dissemination of information, GPR facilitates public engagement, policy communication, crisis management, and relationship building, thereby supporting democratic governance and institutional accountability. The seminal work of Grunig and Hunt (1984) established four influential models of public relations practice: press agency, public information, two-way asymmetric, and two-way symmetric communication, which continue to shape scholarship and practice globally. Collectively, these models underscore the importance of aligning communication strategies with organisational objectives while fostering reciprocal relationships with stakeholders through dialogue, transparency, and responsiveness.

Subsequent scholarship has expanded this perspective by positioning public relations as a strategic management function that enhances organisational legitimacy through planned communication across multiple platforms (Grunig & Dozier, 2003; Heath & Johansen, 2018). Within government settings, GPR encompasses media relations, public information management, stakeholder engagement, crisis communication, and reputation management. Effective government public relations contributes not only to public trust but also to transparency, citizen participation, and democratic accountability.

The universal applicability of these predominantly Western normative models, however, has been questioned, particularly in authoritarian and postcolonial contexts where the assumptions underpinning symmetrical communication are seldom realised. Ethiopia exemplifies this challenge. Although the conceptual frameworks developed by Grunig and Hunt provide valuable insights into communication objectives and relationship management, they inadequately explain the historical evolution of government communication within Ethiopia's distinctive political trajectory. Across successive regimes, communication has functioned less as a mechanism for reciprocal dialogue than as an instrument of state authority, political legitimacy, and regime consolidation.

Historical evidence demonstrates that, despite considerable changes in communication technologies and media platforms, the Ethiopian GPR has consistently prioritised political control over participatory engagement. Rather than facilitating deliberative dialogue, communication systems have

largely served to reinforce state authority, manage public opinion, and sustain governmental legitimacy. The Ethiopian experience exposes a divergence between normative public relations theory, which emphasises trust, transparency, and mutual understanding, and the practical realities of state communication within developmental authoritarian contexts. This divergence suggests that prevailing public relations theories require contextual adaptation to adequately explain communicative practices beyond liberal democratic settings.

Theoretical Framework

This study analyses the historical development of Ethiopian government public relations through an integrated theoretical framework comprising three complementary perspectives: Critical Political Economy of Communication (CPEC), Adaptive Communicative Authoritarianism, and Postcolonial Communication Theory. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive analytical lens for examining the evolution of communicative power within a postcolonial state characterised by developmental authoritarianism.

CPEC provides the foundational analytical perspective by examining how communication systems are structured through relations of power, ownership, resource allocation, and institutional control (Mosco, 2009; McChesney, 2008). Rather than treating communication as a neutral exchange of information, CPEC emphasises the political and economic conditions that determine who controls communication infrastructures, whose voices are amplified, and how communicative resources are distributed. Within the Ethiopian context, this perspective illuminates how successive governments have consolidated communicative authority through ownership of media institutions, regulation of broadcasting systems, allocation of advertising revenues, and incorporation of journalists into state-centred patronage structures. Consistent with Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model, these structural arrangements shape not only the content of communication but also the boundaries of legitimate public discourse.

While CPEC provides powerful insights into structural dimensions of communicative power, its emphasis on ownership and commodification was largely developed within Western capitalist media systems. It requires theoretical extension when applied to authoritarian postcolonial contexts where state authority, rather than market forces, constitutes the principal mechanism of communicative control. To address this limitation, the study introduces the

concept of Adaptive Communicative Authoritarianism (ACA) as a mid-range analytical construct.

Adaptive Communicative Authoritarianism (ACA) explains how authoritarian governments continuously modify communication strategies, technologies, and narratives in response to changing political, technological, and social environments while preserving centralised control over information and public discourse. Whereas CPEC primarily addresses the question of *who* owns and controls communication, Adaptive Communicative Authoritarianism focuses on *how* authoritarian communication systems evolve, adapt, and persist across historical ruptures. Drawing upon authoritarian resilience theory (Levitsky & Way, 2010), the concept demonstrates that Ethiopia's transition from imperial print media to revolutionary broadcasting, ethnic federalist communication structures, and contemporary digital platforms represents tactical adaptation rather than fundamental democratisation. Apparent communication reforms, therefore, constitute strategic adjustments designed to preserve political authority under changing historical conditions.

To further strengthen this analytical framework, the study incorporates Postcolonial Communication Theory and broader Global South scholarship. This perspective responds to sustained calls for the de-Westernisation of communication research by recognising that theories developed within Euro-American contexts may inadequately explain communication practices shaped by colonial histories, indigenous epistemologies, and alternative political trajectories (Thussu, 2009; Waisbord & Mellado, 2014). Drawing upon Chakravartty and Zhao (2008) and Alhassan and Chakravartty (2014), the study examines how contemporary Ethiopian government communication simultaneously reflects colonial legacies, indigenous political cultures, and modern state-building projects.

The postcolonial perspective further acknowledges that Ethiopian government public relations cannot be understood independently of local communicative traditions, including Amharic rhetorical conventions, Orthodox Christian discursive practices, oral communication systems, and culturally embedded forms of political legitimacy (Dunn, 2018). Following Willems (2014), the study recognises that authoritarian communication in African contexts frequently appropriates indigenous cultural forms to strengthen state legitimacy. More recent contributions concerning visual politics in the Global South (Veneti & Rovisco, 2024), comparative public administration (Onyango & Jamil, 2025),

and African communication epistemologies (Mudavanhu, 2021) reinforce the need for context-sensitive theorisation grounded in local knowledge systems. Guided by Mignolo's (2011) concept of *epistemic disobedience*, the Ethiopian case is, therefore, approached not merely as an application of existing theories but as a source of theoretical innovation capable of enriching global communication scholarship.

Synthesis: An Integrated Analytical Framework

The integration of these three theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the historical evolution of government public relations in Ethiopia. The framework simultaneously examines structural power relations, adaptive authoritarian practices, and postcolonial specificities, thereby enabling a multi-dimensional understanding of communicative governance across successive political regimes.

The framework operates across two interconnected dimensions. The first examines the material foundations of communication, including ownership structures, institutional arrangements, media infrastructures, and resource allocation. The second investigates discursive practices, encompassing state narratives, legitimisation strategies, ideological framing, and platform-specific communication. This dual perspective enables the analysis to capture both continuity and change: continuity in the persistent centralisation of communicative authority and change in the adaptive strategies through which successive governments have responded to evolving political and technological conditions. Importantly, the framework remains firmly grounded within Ethiopia's distinctive historical and political context. It accounts for the enduring influence of imperial bureaucratic traditions, the reconfiguration of communicative authority under ethnic federalism, and the contemporary digital communication strategies employed by the Prosperity Party. At the same time, it contributes to broader theoretical debates concerning authoritarian communication, state legitimacy, and public relations in the Global South.

By synthesising CPEC, ACA, and the PCT, this study advances a contextually grounded analytical framework capable of explaining government public relations beyond the assumptions of liberal democratic models. Rather than treating Ethiopia as an exceptional case requiring theoretical accommodation, the study positions it as a productive site for refining, extending, and, where necessary, challenging dominant theories of government communication and public relations

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative historical research design to examine the evolution of Ethiopian GPR across successive political regimes between 1940 and 2024. Historical inquiry was considered the most appropriate methodological approach because it facilitates the systematic investigation of institutional continuity, change, and adaptation through the critical interpretation of documentary evidence situated within its historical context (Creswell, 2018). Rather than treating government communication as a static administrative function, the study conceptualised GPR as a historically contingent institution whose objectives, structures, and practices have been continually reshaped by changing political ideologies, governance systems, and communication technologies.

Data were generated through an extensive documentary analysis integrating archival records, official government publications, policy documents, legislative instruments, scholarly literature, and contemporary digital communication platforms. The multi-source documentary strategy enabled methodological triangulation by combining historical, policy, institutional and digital evidence, thereby strengthening analytical depth and enhancing the credibility of the historical interpretations.

A total of 23 documentary sources were analysed, comprising 35 primary and 28 secondary documents. The primary corpus included archival records obtained from the National Archives and Library of Ethiopia, official proclamations published in the *Federal Negarit Gazette*, Ministry of Information records, national communication and media policies, development plans, press legislation, digital communication strategies, public relations training manuals, and civil service policy documents. Collectively, these sources captured the institutional evolution of government communication from the Imperial administration through the Derg regime, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and the current Prosperity Party administration. The inclusion of official digital communication strategies, government websites, and institutional communication manuals enabled the study to examine how traditional state communication structures have adapted to digital governance and networked public communication.

To capture contemporary developments in government communication, documentary analysis was extended to official digital platforms covering the

period 2010–2024. These comprised the Government Communication Service (GCS) website, 16 verified government Facebook pages representing the Office of the Prime Minister, the Government Communication Service, and all regional state communication bureaus, together with sixteen official Telegram channels and archived government news releases disseminated through social media. These materials provided evidence of how state communication has evolved in response to digitalisation, changing citizen engagement patterns, and emerging communication technologies.

The secondary evidence base comprised 28 scholarly sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, book chapters, master's and doctoral theses addressing Ethiopian public relations, government communication, political communication, media policy, and state–society relations. Preference was given to studies published between 1990 and 2026 to capture contemporary scholarly developments while retaining seminal historical works necessary for contextual interpretation.

Document selection followed four explicit inclusion criteria to ensure methodological rigour. First, documents were required to demonstrate direct relevance to government communication, public relations practice, media governance, or state communication policy. Second, documentary authority was established through official government provenance for primary sources or a peer-reviewed scholarly publication for secondary sources. Third, historical representativeness was ensured by purposively including documentary evidence from each of Ethiopia's four major political periods: the Imperial era (1940–1974), the Derg regime (1974–1991), the EPRDF administration (1991–2018), and the Prosperity Party period (2018–2024). Finally, accessibility criteria restricted analysis to documents available in Amharic, Afaan Oromo, or English, while professionally translated versions were utilised where necessary to preserve documentary integrity.

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase framework advanced by Braun and Clarke (2021), adapted for historical documentary research. Analysis proceeded through familiarisation with the documentary corpus, systematic coding, iterative theme development, theme refinement, conceptual definition, and interpretive reporting. To strengthen analytical rigour, a two-cycle coding strategy was employed. The first cycle involved descriptive open coding to identify recurring institutional practices, communication functions, governance structures, and policy orientations. The

second cycle utilised pattern coding to consolidate conceptually related codes into higher-order themes explaining continuity, discontinuity, and adaptation across political regimes. Throughout the analytical process, interpretation followed an abductive logic, moving iteratively between documentary evidence, emerging themes, and relevant theoretical perspectives. This iterative engagement enabled the identification of the study's central explanatory construct, adaptive communicative authoritarianism, as an empirically grounded conceptual framework for understanding the historical evolution of Ethiopian government public relations.

Several procedures enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings. Methodological triangulation across archival, policy, legislative, scholarly, and digital sources enabled corroboration of historical interpretations. A comprehensive audit trail documented coding decisions, thematic development, and analytical reflections throughout the study. Reflexive memoing was maintained to minimise researcher bias and ensure transparency in interpretive decision-making. Finally, the analytical framework and emerging interpretations underwent peer debriefing through critical review by senior scholars in media, communication, and public relations, whose feedback further informed successive refinements of the coding framework and thematic interpretation. Ethical integrity was maintained by relying exclusively on publicly accessible documentary sources, ensuring accurate representation of historical records, and applying established principles of scholarly transparency, source attribution, and interpretive reflexivity.

Results and Discussion

The documentary evidence demonstrates that GPR in Ethiopia evolved not as a linear process of professionalisation but as a sequence of institutional adaptations shaped by shifting political ideologies, state-building imperatives, and changing communication technologies. Across successive regimes, communication structures were repeatedly reorganised in response to political transition; however, their purpose remained remarkably consistent: to construct political legitimacy, consolidate state authority, and manage public opinion. While institutional arrangements and communication technologies became progressively more sophisticated between the Imperial era and the contemporary digital state, the dominant communication logic remained overwhelmingly state-centric. This continuity was noted as forming the empirical basis of the study's emergent concept of adaptive communicative

authoritarianism, whereby successive political regimes continuously modified communication institutions without fundamentally relinquishing state control over public discourse.

Imperial Era (1940–1974): Institutionalising State-Centred Communication

Results for the documentary analysis reflect that the historical origins of GRP in Ethiopia are heavily contested. While some scholars locate its institutional emergence during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie I through the establishment of the Civil Service Commission and the Ministry of Information (Alemnew, 2019; Berhanu, 2008; Gezihagne, 2018; Molla, 2021), others traced its foundations to Emperor Menelik II's establishment of the Ministry of Pen (*Tsehafe Tezaz*) in 1907 (Ayele, 2021; Bekele & Vanderlinden, 1967; Chala, 2023). Although the precise institutional origin remains disputed, the documentary evidence indicates that government communication emerged alongside the centralisation of the modern Ethiopian state.

Results indicated that communication institutions were established primarily to strengthen administrative coordination, preserve official records, disseminate government information, and reinforce political authority rather than facilitate reciprocal engagement between government and citizens.

Based on the documentary evidence, the reign of Emperor Menelik II, therefore, represents a formative phase in the institutionalisation of government communication. The Ministry of Pen, results show that they combined administrative record-keeping, management of official publications, ceremonial communication, and supervision of early government printing activities, establishing the organisational foundations upon which later public relations institutions developed. Communication during this period functioned as an instrument of governance, supporting territorial consolidation, administrative modernisation, and political legitimacy through carefully controlled information dissemination.

The strategic use of newspapers, official announcements, and public ceremonies during national events, notably the Battle of Adwa, illustrates an early appreciation of communication as an instrument of statecraft rather than public dialogue. The transformation of the Ministry of Pen into the Ministry of Information and Tourism marked the formal institutionalisation of government public relations within the machinery of the modern state. Simultaneously,

the results indicate that communicative capacity increased due to the rapid expansion of radio broadcasting, government publications, and, later, television. Table 1 summarises the institutional functions of the communication logics of the Ethiopian GPR during the Imperial Era (1940–1974).

Table 1: Institutional Functions and Communication Logics of Ethiopian GPR during the Imperial Era (1940–1974)

Dimension	Empirical Evidence from Documentary Analysis	Interpretation for GPR
Institutional Purpose	Expansion of the Ministry of Information and Tourism, increased use of radio, print media and official publications.	Government public relations became increasingly institutionalised as a strategic instrument of state communication rather than a mechanism for public participation.
Domestic Communication	Communication remained highly centralised, with official proclamations, state-controlled media, and ceremonial messaging dominating information dissemination.	Public relations functioned primarily to reinforce imperial authority, strengthen political legitimacy, and maintain internal stability through one-way communication.
Nation-building Function	Communication campaigns promoted modernisation, national unity, and imperial development programmes.	Government public relations served as an instrument for constructing a unified national identity while legitimising state-led modernisation.
International Communication	Diplomatic messaging increasingly emphasised Ethiopia's leadership in Pan-Africanism, African independence, and international diplomacy.	Government public relations extended beyond domestic administration to become an important tool of public diplomacy, enhancing Ethiopia's international legitimacy and regional influence.

Dimension	Empirical Evidence from Documentary Analysis	Interpretation for GPR
Communication Orientation	Distinct communication strategies were employed for domestic and international audiences.	The coexistence of outward-facing diplomatic communication and inward-facing political control illustrates an early form of strategic communication dualism that became a defining characteristic of Ethiopian government public relations.

The documentary evidence demonstrates that communication institutionalisation during the imperial period was accompanied by an expansion rather than a democratisation of state communication. While the growing communication infrastructure enhanced the government's capacity to disseminate information nationally and internationally, its primary function remained the projection of imperial authority and the construction of political legitimacy. Domestically, communication reinforced centralised governance through tightly controlled information flows, whereas internationally it supported Ethiopia's Pan-African diplomacy and its image as a modernising African state. This divergence between external diplomatic engagement and internal political control reveals the emergence of a dual communication logic, providing early empirical evidence for what this study conceptualises as adaptive communicative authoritarianism.

The findings demonstrate that professional communication institutions emerged well before the professionalisation of public relations as a distinct managerial function. Institutional modernisation, therefore, expanded the state's communicative capacity without producing a corresponding transition towards communicative democratisation. Rather than facilitating reciprocal engagement, successive administrative reforms enhanced the state's capacity to control information, construct political legitimacy, and manage public discourse while preserving fundamentally hierarchical relationships between government and citizens (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; L'Etang, 2008; Edwards, 2018). Based on the results, GPR was institutionalised as an administrative instrument of political authority rather than a strategic mechanism for dialogue, transparency, or

mutual understanding (Botan & Taylor, 2004; McNair, 2018). This enduring state-centred communication logic provides compelling historical evidence for the study's conceptualisation of adaptive communicative authoritarianism, whereby communication institutions continuously evolved in organisational structure and technological sophistication while maintaining authoritarian patterns of information management and political control (Castells, 2009; Esser, 2013).

Imperial Government Public Relations: Hegemonic Press Agency

The findings indicate that GPR during the imperial period was characterised by a hegemonic press agency model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Documentary evidence from the Ministry of Information archives (1942–1974), Imperial Government records, and contemporary policy documents demonstrates that communication was one-directional, flowing from the state to citizens with minimal opportunity for dialogue, participation, or public accountability (Ethiopian Imperial Archives, 1965; Ministry of Information, 2003; Government Communication Service, 2025). Official communication prioritised the construction of political legitimacy through imperial decrees, ceremonial symbolism, official publications, and carefully orchestrated public narratives rather than reciprocal communication (Bahru, 2002; Berhanu, 2008; Chala, 2023). Similarly, the extensive documentation of imperial authority and reliance on highly symbolic public rituals reveal an administrative culture in which communication functioned primarily to reinforce political power, institutional continuity, and state legitimacy (Ayele, 2021; Woldeyes, 2018).

The documentary evidence further reveals the coexistence of two distinct communication logics. Internationally, Ethiopia projected itself as a progressive African state through strategic diplomatic narratives promoting anti-colonial solidarity, Pan-Africanism, and African unity (Solomon, 1998; Bahru, 2002). Domestically, however, communication remained highly centralised through state-controlled media and official information channels, closely aligned with political surveillance and administrative control (Berhanu, 2008; Clapham, 1969; Niggussie, 2014). This divergence demonstrates an early duality within Ethiopian GPR whereby communication functioned simultaneously as an instrument of international public diplomacy and domestic political authority. Consistent with the documentary evidence, this performative dualism became a defining characteristic of Ethiopian government communication and laid the institutional foundations for what this study conceptualises as

adaptive communicative authoritarianism, in which communication systems progressively modernised while preserving enduring patterns of state-centred information management and political control (Castells, 2009; Edwards, 2018; L'Etang, 2008).

The Derg Regime (1974–1991): Revolutionary Communication and Ideological Control

The documentary evidence indicates that the overthrow of the imperial regime in 1974 transformed both the purpose and institutional architecture of GPR. Whereas communication during the imperial period primarily legitimised monarchical authority through symbolic statecraft and administrative communication, the Derg reconstructed GPR as an explicit instrument of revolutionary mobilisation and ideological indoctrination (Berhanu, 2008; Chala, 2023; Niggussie, 2014). Government communication became inseparable from Marxist-Leninist political doctrine, with communication institutions systematically reorganised to consolidate state authority, sustain revolutionary legitimacy, and suppress competing political narratives (Ethiopian Revolutionary Council, 1980; Molla, 2021).

Archival and policy documents further demonstrate that successive restructuring of the Ministry of Information progressively expanded the state's monopoly over communication. The Ministry of Information, established following the revolution and subsequently reorganised into the Ministry of Information and Tourism and later the Ministry of Information and National Guidance, assumed direct oversight of the Ethiopian News Agency (ENA), Revolutionary Ethiopia Radio, the Press Office, Public Relations Office, newspapers, and magazines (Molla, 2021; Ethiopian Revolutionary Council, 1980). Rather than representing routine administrative restructuring, these institutional changes consolidated an integrated propaganda apparatus capable of coordinating ideological messaging across all government communication channels. Independent media virtually 'disappeared', while revolutionary narratives dominated newspapers, broadcasting, public campaigns, and civic education programmes (Clapham, 2002; Berhanu, 2008).

The findings further reveal that the Derg's communication strategy was characterised by systematic media nationalisation, mass mobilisation campaigns such as *Zemecha*, revolutionary symbolism, and the deliberate replacement of imperial iconography with socialist political imagery (Clapham, 2002; Niggussie, 2014). Communication no longer served merely to legitimise political authority but actively sought to mobilise citizens around revolutionary

ideology while simultaneously restricting alternative interpretations of political reality. Although participation was rhetorically encouraged through mass campaigns and revolutionary organisations, documentary evidence suggests that such participation remained tightly controlled within predefined ideological boundaries. This study, therefore, conceptualises the communication model of the Derg period as coercive symmetry, whereby the appearance of citizen participation concealed fundamentally authoritarian communication practices. Consistent with Grunig and Hunt's (1984) Press Agency/Publicity and Two-Way Asymmetric models, government communication functioned predominantly as organised persuasion designed to shape public opinion rather than facilitate reciprocal dialogue.

Importantly, the transition from imperial communication to revolutionary propaganda did not constitute a departure from authoritarian communication traditions but rather their ideological adaptation. While the political discourse shifted from imperial monarchy to socialist revolution, the underlying communication logic remained remarkably consistent. The state retained exclusive authority over defining legitimate political narratives, controlling information flows, and regulating public discourse through highly centralised communication institutions (Berhanu, 2008; Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003; Chala, 2023).

The findings suggest that institutional restructuring altered the ideological content of government communication without fundamentally transforming its communicative orientation. Instead, authoritarian communication was modernised and repurposed to serve a different political ideology. This continuity provides further empirical support for the study's concept of adaptive communicative authoritarianism, demonstrating how successive Ethiopian political regimes reconfigured communication institutions while preserving enduring patterns of state-centred information management, political legitimisation, and control over public discourse.

Persistent Challenges and Dialogic Deficits

Despite the EPRDF government's rhetorical commitment to democratisation, decentralisation, and ethnic federalism, the documentary evidence indicates that these reforms produced only limited transformation in the underlying philosophy and practice of government public relations. Although communication institutions expanded and organisational reforms introduced the language of transparency, participation, and development communication, state communication remained firmly centred on managing political narratives

rather than facilitating genuine public engagement (Abbink, 2011; Mengistu, 2021; Niggussie, 2014). The institutional expansion of government public relations was not accompanied by a corresponding transition towards dialogic communication.

The findings identify three interrelated constraints that undermined the development of participatory government communication. First, institutional inertia preserved highly centralised administrative cultures inherited from the Imperial and Derg regimes, limiting the capacity of communication institutions to embrace reciprocal engagement. Second, the introduction of ethnic federalism generated competing communication narratives between federal and regional governments, complicating message coordination while leaving strategic communication authority concentrated within central government institutions. Third, although policy documents increasingly recognised citizen participation, institutional mechanisms for systematic public consultation, stakeholder engagement, and feedback remained weak or largely symbolic (Mengistu, 2021; Woldeyes, 2018). As a result, government communication continued to operate predominantly through controlled information dissemination rather than collaborative public dialogue.

The findings suggest that the EPRDF's adoption of developmental communication represented a significant discursive shift without an equivalent transformation in communicative practice. While official rhetoric increasingly reflected democratic governance, transparency, and citizen participation, documentary evidence demonstrates that communication institutions continued to privilege agenda management, policy legitimisation, and state-centred information control (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Information, 2005; Woldeyes, 2018). This gap between participatory discourse and administrative practice is conceptualised in this study as aspirational dialogism, a communication orientation that appropriates the language of dialogue and participation while preserving fundamentally hierarchical patterns of state communication.

The persistence of these dialogic deficits demonstrates that constitutional reform and organisational restructuring alone were insufficient to transform entrenched communication cultures. Instead, the historical evidence suggests remarkable institutional continuity across successive political regimes. Although communication objectives, organisational structures, and political ideologies evolved, the state's dominant role in defining legitimate public discourse

remained largely intact. The EPRDF period, therefore, represents another phase in the historical evolution of adaptive communicative authoritarianism, in which government public relations selectively incorporated the normative language of dialogue, participation, and stakeholder engagement while maintaining enduring patterns of centralised information management and political control (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Edwards, 2018; L'Etang, 2008).

The Digital Age: Innovation and Disruption (2018-Present)

The documentary evidence indicates that the advent of the Prosperity Party (PP) administration in 2018 marked the most significant technological transformation in the history of Ethiopian GPR. Unlike previous regimes, where communication was predominantly mediated through conventional mass media and bureaucratic institutions, government communication increasingly shifted towards digitally networked platforms supported by e-government initiatives, social media, and integrated digital governance strategies (Office of the Prime Minister, 2023; Ministry of Innovation and Technology, 2024). These reforms signalled an institutional recognition that contemporary state legitimacy increasingly depends on rapid, interactive, and technology-enabled communication.

The findings demonstrate that the National Digital Government Strategy (2024–2029) institutionalised digital communication as a central component of public administration by prioritising transparency, service delivery, citizen participation, and multi-stakeholder engagement (Ministry of Innovation and Technology, 2024). Government communication expanded beyond traditional broadcasting to include official websites, Facebook pages, Telegram channels, digital press briefings, and other social media platforms, creating unprecedented opportunities for direct interaction between government institutions and citizens. Documentary evidence further suggests that digital platforms enhanced the government's capacity for real-time crisis communication, multilingual information dissemination, and broader public access to official information, thereby substantially expanding the communicative reach of government public relations.

However, the findings equally reveal that technological innovation did not alter the underlying logic of state communication. Although digital platforms created new opportunities for interaction, communication remained predominantly government-driven, with agenda setting, information production, and narrative management continuing to be centrally coordinated

through official communication structures (Gebremichael, 2022; Office of the Prime Minister, 2023). Furthermore, persistent challenges, including misinformation, digital inequality, uneven digital literacy, online political polarisation, and periodic restrictions on internet access, continued to constrain meaningful public dialogue and weaken the deliberative potential of digital government communication (Gebremichael, 2022). These findings suggest that digital transformation expanded the technological capacity of government communication without necessarily producing a corresponding transformation in communicative governance.

The documentary analysis indicates that the Prosperity Party period represents not a departure from earlier communication traditions but their technological adaptation. Rather than replacing state-centred communication with fully participatory digital engagement, digital technologies were incorporated into existing governance structures to enhance administrative responsiveness while simultaneously preserving the state's strategic control over public narratives. This pattern illustrates the highest stage in the historical evolution of Ethiopian government public relations, where digital innovation coexists with enduring mechanisms of information management and political legitimacy. The findings extend the study's conceptualisation of adaptive communicative authoritarianism, demonstrating that successive political regimes have modernised communication institutions and technologies while maintaining the state's central role in defining legitimate public discourse. In the digital era, authoritarian communication has become networked, technologically sophisticated, and platform-based, rather than fundamentally more dialogic (Castells, 2009; Edwards, 2018; L'Etang, 2008).

Government Public Relations Reform and Innovation after 2018

The documentary evidence indicates that the post-2018 political transition initiated the most comprehensive institutional restructuring of the Ethiopian GPR since the introduction of ethnic federalism. Reform efforts sought to reposition government communication as a more coherent, transparent, and citizen-oriented function capable of responding to an increasingly digital and politically complex communication environment (Alemnew, 2019; Mulatu, 2017). Official policy documents reveal a deliberate shift towards institutional coordination, accountability, transparency, and citizen participation, with communication reforms intended to strengthen collaboration between federal

and regional communication structures while improving the dissemination of government information and public engagement.

A significant institutional transformation occurred with the dissolution of the Government Communication Affairs Office (GCAO) through Proclamation No. 1097/2018 and the transfer of its responsibilities to the newly established Press Secretariat within the Office of the Prime Minister (Mengistu, 2021). Documentary evidence suggests that this restructuring was intended to modernise government communication by improving media access to senior political leadership and enhancing the strategic coordination of official messaging. However, the reforms also generated institutional uncertainty. Molla (2021) argues that the dissolution of the GCAO weakened the established public relations architecture, reducing the institutional prominence of professional government public relations in favour of a more centralised communication structure. The findings suggest that institutional restructuring simultaneously created opportunities for communication modernisation while disrupting existing organisational capacities and professional communication frameworks.

A second phase of reform emerged with the establishment of the Government Communication Service (GCS) under Council of Ministers Regulation No. 488/2022. This regulatory framework provided a clearer legal mandate for government communication by defining the organisational structure, functions, and responsibilities of the GCS (Government Communication Service, 2025). Documentary evidence further reflects that the new institutional framework prioritised strategic communication, coordinated government messaging, public access to information, research, innovation, professional capacity building, and citizen engagement. These priorities represent a notable departure from earlier communication frameworks by explicitly recognising transparency, professionalism, and innovation as core institutional objectives rather than merely administrative functions.

The Government Communication Service's mission further reflects an institutional commitment to developing an integrated government communication system capable of ensuring consistent messaging, strengthening public access to official information, promoting communication professionalism, and enhancing organisational learning through research and innovation (Government Communication Service, 2025). This institutional repositioning suggests an important conceptual shift in which government public relations are recognised as a strategic governance function supporting public trust,

administrative coordination, and evidence-informed decision-making within a rapidly evolving digital communication environment.

Nevertheless, the findings reveal a persistent gap between institutional aspirations and operational realities. Despite substantial organisational reform, documentary evidence highlights continuing challenges associated with communication centralisation, infrastructural limitations, uneven digital capacity, public mistrust, misinformation, and concerns regarding information freedom (Gebremichael, 2022; Government Communication Service, 2025). The concentration of strategic communication within a single government institution, while improving message consistency, also raises questions regarding communication pluralism, institutional independence, and the representation of diverse societal perspectives. Although transparency and citizen engagement have become central elements of official communication discourse, their practical implementation remains constrained by longstanding institutional and political challenges.

The findings suggest that post-2018 reforms represent an important phase in the evolution of Ethiopian government public relations, characterised by significant institutional innovation without a complete transformation of communicative governance. Communication institutions have become increasingly digital, professionalised, and strategically coordinated; however, the state's dominant role in agenda setting, narrative construction, and information management has remained largely intact. Rather than replacing earlier models of state-centred communication, digital reforms have modernised and reconfigured them within contemporary governance structures. This pattern provides further support for the study's concept of adaptive communicative authoritarianism, demonstrating how government communication continuously adapts to new political, institutional, and technological environments while preserving enduring mechanisms of state legitimacy, strategic communication, and control over public discourse (Castells, 2009; Edwards, 2018; L'Etang, 2008).

Digital Transformation: Moving Beyond Centralised Communication Models

Results from the documentary study reflect that the post-2018 reform period marked a decisive transition from conventional government communication towards digitally enabled strategic communication. Government public relations expanded beyond traditional state-controlled media to incorporate digital diplomacy, social media engagement, e-government initiatives, crisis

communication, public health messaging, and national image management (Office of the Prime Minister, 2023; Ministry of Innovation and Technology, 2024). Unlike previous communication models that relied predominantly on hierarchical information dissemination, digital platforms created unprecedented opportunities for direct interaction between government institutions and citizens, enabling faster information exchange, broader stakeholder reach, and more responsive public communication.

One of the most significant manifestations of this transformation emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Documentary and empirical evidence indicate that government communication relied on digital platforms to coordinate risk communication, disseminate public health information, counter misinformation, and mobilise community engagement (Getaneh et al., 2020; Tolu et al., 2020; Zikargae, 2020; Mossie et al., 2025). These interventions represented a notable departure from earlier communication approaches by adopting more targeted, interactive, and evidence-informed communication strategies. Similarly, investments in disaster preparedness, emergency medical communication systems, and digital health coordination demonstrated an expanding recognition of government public relations as a strategic governance function extending beyond political communication into broader societal resilience and emergency management (Tran Ngoc et al., 2018).

The findings further indicate that digital transformation extended beyond crisis communication to encompass broader state modernisation objectives. Government communication emphasised digital diplomacy, national branding, e-governance, public-private collaboration, and technology-enabled citizen engagement (Adamu, 2020; Bilate, 2022). The developments suggest a gradual transition from the predominantly developmental communication paradigm associated with the EPRDF administration towards a more multidimensional communication framework integrating governance, innovation, service delivery, and strategic reputation management. Official policy documents consistently emphasise transparency, stakeholder engagement, and inclusive communication as central objectives of digital government reform (Ministry of Innovation and Technology, 2024).

Nevertheless, the documentary evidence also reveals that digital innovation generated new governance challenges. The rapid expansion of social media simultaneously increased opportunities for citizen participation while intensifying the spread of misinformation, online hate speech, ethnic

polarisation, and digitally mediated political mobilisation (Adamu, 2020; Belay et al., 2020; Bilate, 2022; Eranfeno, 2022). The developments exposed institutional weaknesses, including uneven digital literacy, infrastructural limitations, fragmented regulatory frameworks, and limited institutional capacity to manage increasingly complex digital communication ecosystems. Government responses combined digital engagement initiatives with enhanced regulatory interventions aimed at managing online information environments.

The findings suggest that digital transformation has not replaced earlier state-centred communication traditions but rather reconfigured them within technologically sophisticated communication environments. Although digital platforms have expanded opportunities for interaction, transparency, and citizen engagement, government communication continues to operate largely within centrally coordinated institutional frameworks responsible for agenda setting, strategic messaging, and narrative management. Rather than signalling a transition to fully dialogic government communication, the post-2018 digital reforms illustrate the evolution of state communication towards increasingly networked, platform-based governance while preserving enduring patterns of political legitimacy and information management.

These findings provide support for the proposed concept of adaptive communicative authoritarianism. The Ethiopian experience demonstrates that digital technologies do not automatically democratise government communication. Instead, they may simultaneously expand citizen engagement, strengthen administrative responsiveness, and reinforce the state's capacity to coordinate strategic narratives within increasingly complex digital public spheres. The post-2018 period represents not a rupture with earlier communication traditions but their technological adaptation, illustrating how authoritarian communication can evolve through institutional innovation while maintaining continuity in its fundamental relationship with political power (Castells, 2009; Edwards, 2018; L'Etang, 2008).

Challenges: Misinformation, Polarisation, and Digital Authoritarianism

The documentary evidence indicates that Ethiopia's digital transformation has generated a paradox in GPR. While digital technologies have expanded opportunities for government communication, transparency, and citizen engagement, they have simultaneously intensified new forms of communicative vulnerability, including misinformation, political polarisation, online hate speech, and declining public trust (Gebremichael, 2022; Skjerdal & Moges,

2021). Rather than replacing earlier communication challenges, digitalisation has fundamentally altered the mechanisms through which political contestation and state communication occur.

One of the most significant developments emerging from the documentary analysis is the erosion of traditional communication gatekeeping. The rapid expansion of social media platforms has enabled direct interaction between government institutions and citizens while bypassing conventional media intermediaries (Adamu, 2020; Chekol et al., 2023). This disintermediation of government communication has substantially reduced the state's ability to monopolise public narratives, allowing competing political actors, citizen journalists, activists, and digitally networked communities to influence public discourse in real time. Information now circulates within a fragmented communication ecosystem characterised by accelerated information flows, competing narratives, and diminished institutional control.

The findings further demonstrate that the government's response has combined digital innovation with sophisticated mechanisms of communication management. Documentary evidence indicates growing reliance on coordinated digital campaigns, official social media platforms, strategic visual communication, legislative regulation, and selective control of digital infrastructure to maintain narrative coherence during periods of political uncertainty (Eranfeno, 2022; Government Communication Service, 2025). These developments illustrate a transition from conventional bureaucratic communication towards platform-mediated strategic communication, in which digital technologies simultaneously expand citizen engagement while enhancing the state's capacity to coordinate information flows and manage public narratives.

The documentary evidence also highlights the growing importance of visual communication in contemporary government public relations. Official digital campaigns utilise images, short-form videos, and highly curated representations of national development projects, urban renewal initiatives, and infrastructure modernisation to reinforce narratives of governmental effectiveness and national progress. The visual communication strategies have become central instruments of contemporary state legitimacy, extending government public relations beyond textual communication towards increasingly image-centred political communication (Veneti & Rovisco, 2024). While the campaigns have strengthened governmental visibility, they have also generated public

debate concerning transparency, accountability, displacement, and competing interpretations of development outcomes.

Despite substantial increases in government digital communication activity following the 2018 reforms (Bilate & Zou, 2022), documentary evidence and existing scholarship indicate that improvements in communication output have not necessarily translated into higher levels of institutional trust (Asfaw, 2019; Gebremichael, 2022). Instead, persistent concerns regarding misinformation, uneven digital literacy, internet accessibility, political polarisation, and periodic restrictions on digital communication continue to constrain meaningful citizen participation (Belete, 2024; UNDP, 2023; Yinebeb, 2022). The findings suggest that technological expansion alone cannot overcome longstanding institutional deficits in transparency, accountability, and reciprocal communication.

The Ethiopian experience demonstrates that digital transformation does not automatically democratise government public relations. Rather, digital technologies create new opportunities for both participation and political control, producing an increasingly complex communication environment in which openness and regulation coexist. This evolving communication landscape provides further empirical support for the concept of adaptive communicative authoritarianism. Across successive political regimes, communication institutions have consistently adapted to changing political contexts and technological innovations while preserving the state's central role in agenda setting, strategic messaging, and the management of legitimate public discourse.

Although the patterns are rooted in Ethiopia's unique political and historical context, they resonate with broader developments observed across several Global South states, where governments increasingly embrace digital platforms for citizen engagement while simultaneously strengthening regulatory oversight and strategic control of digital communication. The Ethiopian case contributes to emerging comparative scholarship on digital governance, platform politics, and contemporary authoritarian communication by illustrating how technological innovation may modernise, rather than fundamentally transform, longstanding state-centred communication systems (Castells, 2009; Edwards, 2018; Veneti & Rovisco, 2024).

Trajectories of Government Public Relations in Ethiopia

The historical analysis reveals that the evolution of GPR in Ethiopia has been characterised less by ideological rupture than by institutional adaptation.

Although successive political regimes introduced substantial organisational reforms, revised communication policies, and increasingly sophisticated communication technologies, the fundamental relationship between the state and public communication remained remarkably consistent. Across the Imperial, Derg, EPRDF, and Prosperity Party administrations, government public relations evolved through successive adaptations that reflected changing political priorities while preserving the state's dominant role in constructing political legitimacy, managing information, and shaping public discourse.

The findings demonstrate four distinct yet interconnected phases in the historical development of Ethiopian government public relations. During the Imperial period, communication was organised around a hegemonic press agency model characterised by highly centralised information dissemination, symbolic statecraft, and administrative legitimacy. The Derg regime transformed this communication architecture into a system of coercive symmetry, where the rhetoric of revolutionary participation concealed tightly controlled ideological mobilisation and state propaganda. Under the EPRDF administration, government communication increasingly adopted the language of dialogue, participation, and developmental communication; however, these reforms remained constrained by persistent institutional centralisation, producing what this study conceptualises as aspirational dialogism. The post-2018 Prosperity Party period introduced extensive digital transformation, strategic communication, and platform-based engagement. Nevertheless, digital innovation has coexisted with continuing challenges associated with misinformation, political polarisation, information regulation, and state-centred narrative management, illustrating the emergence of increasingly networked forms of government communication rather than a complete transition to dialogic governance.

Viewed longitudinally, these developments demonstrate that the Ethiopian government's public relations have undergone continuous institutional modernisation without a corresponding transformation in its underlying communicative philosophy. Communication institutions became progressively more professionalised, technologically sophisticated, and organisationally integrated; however, their primary functions consistently centred on political legitimation, strategic information management, and the maintenance of state authority. The historical trajectory of Ethiopian GPR reflects an adaptive rather than transformative process, in which new organisational structures and

communication technologies have been incorporated into enduring patterns of state-centred governance.

The historical trajectories provide the empirical foundation for the study's proposed concept of adaptive communicative authoritarianism. The concept captures the capacity of successive political regimes to modernise communication institutions, adopt new communication technologies, and selectively incorporate contemporary public relations principles while preserving the state's central authority over agenda setting, information management, and the boundaries of legitimate public discourse. Rather than representing discrete historical periods, the four regimes collectively illustrate successive stages in the evolution of a resilient communication system that continuously adapts to changing political, institutional, and technological contexts without fundamentally relinquishing its state-centred orientation.

Table 2 synthesises the historical trajectories by illustrating the evolution of Ethiopian GPR from the establishment of the Ministry of Pen during the Imperial period to the contemporary digital communication architecture of the Prosperity Party administration. The synthesis highlights the major institutional reforms, dominant communication models, strategic objectives, communication technologies, and defining characteristics that shaped each historical phase, providing a consolidated overview of the historical progression analysed in this study.

Table 2: Evolution of Ethiopian Government PR across regimes (key Characteristics)

Characteristic	Imperial Era (1889-1974)	Derg Regime (1974-1991)	EPRDF Era (1991- 2018)	Digital Age (2018-Present)
Dominant GPR Model/ Philosophy	Hegemonic Press Agency	Coercive Symmetry	Aspirational Dialogic/ Developmental Communication	Digital Authoritarianism
Communication Flow	Unidirectional/ Top-down	Unidirectional/ Propaganda	Multidirectional (in theory)/Top-down	Fractured Verticalism
Content Focus	Imperial Authority/ National Unity	Marxist- Leninist Propaganda	Development Agendas/Ethnic Recognition	Transparency/ Citizen Engagement (stated)/ Narrative Control
Key Institutions/ Tools	Ministry of Pen/ Information, Radio Ethiopia	Ministry of Advertisement, Nationalised Media, Zemecha Campaigns	Restructured Communication Ministries (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Information, 2005)	Social media, E-government platforms (Ministry of Innovation and Technology, 2024)
Engagement Model	Limited Public Participation	Regime Survival/ Suppression	Limited Dialogue/ Ceremonial Consultations	superficial engagement / Legitimacy Decay

The historical evidence demonstrates that the evolution of GPR in Ethiopia is best understood as a process of institutional adaptation rather than successive episodes of communication reform. Although each political regime introduced new administrative structures, communication philosophies, and technological innovations, these changes occurred within a broader trajectory characterised by the persistent centrality of the state in organising, directing, and legitimising public communication (Bahru, 2002; Chala, 2023; Woldeyes, 2018). The history of Ethiopian GPR reflects continuity through adaptation rather than discontinuity through political transition (Clapham, 2002; Vaughan & Tronvoll, 2003).

Three interrelated trajectories emerge from the documentary analysis. The first is the progressive institutionalisation of government communication. Across the Imperial, Derg, EPRDF, and Prosperity Party administrations, communication evolved from a predominantly administrative function into an increasingly

specialised and strategically managed component of public governance (Alemnew, 2019; Berhanu, 2008; Mengistu, 2021). Institutional reforms expanded communication mandates, professionalised communication structures, and incorporated new media technologies (Government Communication Service, 2025; Ministry of Innovation and Technology, 2024). However, these organisational developments primarily strengthened the state's communicative capacity rather than fundamentally transforming state–citizen communication, reflecting the enduring centralisation of communicative authority identified throughout the historical record (Molla, 2021; Woldeyes, 2018).

The second trajectory concerns the changing technologies of state communication. The documentary evidence illustrates a gradual transition from ceremonial communication, official proclamations, and state broadcasting during the Imperial period to revolutionary propaganda, developmental communication, digital platforms, and integrated e-government systems under successive administrations (Marcus, 1994; Ministry of Information, 2003; Office of the Prime Minister, 2023). Each technological transition expanded the reach, speed, and sophistication of government communication while enhancing the state's capacity to coordinate strategic messaging (Bilate, 2022; Ministry of Innovation and Technology, 2024). Nevertheless, technological innovation did not fundamentally alter communicative governance. Instead, new communication technologies were incorporated into existing institutional arrangements, extending rather than replacing established practices of state-centred information management (Castells, 2009; Edwards, 2018).

The third trajectory reflects the evolution of communicative legitimacy. While the language of government communication shifted substantially, from imperial authority and revolutionary mobilisation to developmental governance, transparency, citizen participation, and digital engagement, the underlying objective remained remarkably consistent: the construction and maintenance of political legitimacy (Abbink, 2011; Chala, 2023; Niggussie, 2014). Documentary evidence suggests that successive governments appropriated internationally recognised public relations principles, including stakeholder engagement, accountability, dialogue, and transparency (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Johnston & Lane, 2023; Liu & Horsley, 2023). However, these normative commitments were implemented within communication systems that continued to privilege coordinated messaging, administrative authority, and centralised agenda setting (Edwards, 2018; L'Etang, 2008; Wæraas & Ihlen, 2024).

Taken together, these trajectories demonstrate that Ethiopian government public relations has experienced substantial institutional modernisation without an equivalent transformation in its communicative orientation. Communication systems became progressively more professional, technologically sophisticated, and organisationally integrated, yet their operational logic remained predominantly state-centred (Bahru, 2002; Chala, 2023; Woldeyes, 2018). The historical significance of the Ethiopian case therefore lies not in a linear progression from authoritarian communication to democratic engagement, but in the capacity of communication institutions to continually adapt to changing political, administrative, and technological environments while preserving enduring patterns of state authority.

The findings provide the foundation for the study's proposed concept of Adaptive Communicative Authoritarianism (ACA). The concept explains how successive governments selectively adopted new communication institutions, technologies, and professional public relations practices while maintaining strategic control over agenda setting, information management, and the construction of political legitimacy. Rather than representing isolated historical episodes, the four political regimes collectively illustrate an evolving communication system characterised by institutional continuity, technological adaptation, and the persistent prioritisation of state legitimacy over reciprocal communication. This finding extends Critical Political Economy of Communication by demonstrating that authoritarian resilience is sustained not only through ownership and institutional control but also through the continual adaptation of communication practices to changing political and technological conditions (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Mosco, 2009).

Beyond Ethiopia, the findings contribute to emerging scholarship on government communication, comparative public administration, and communication studies in the Global South. They reinforce recent arguments that institutional development in postcolonial states should be interpreted through historically grounded and context-sensitive frameworks rather than linear models of democratic convergence (Onyango & Jamil, 2025; Waisbord & Mellado, 2014). Consistent with postcolonial communication scholarship (Alhassan & Chakravartty, 2014; Chakravartty & Zhao, 2008; Thussu, 2009), the Ethiopian experience demonstrates that communication reform is shaped as much by historical institutional legacies, indigenous political cultures, and state-building imperatives as by technological innovation or political transition.

The study advances contemporary government public relations scholarship by demonstrating that communication modernisation and digital transformation do not necessarily produce equivalent shifts towards dialogic governance. Instead, institutional continuity may persist despite profound changes in organisational structures, communication technologies, and political discourse, making Ethiopia a theoretically significant case for understanding the evolution of state communication in the Global South.

Figure 1 presents the proposed *Adaptive Communicative Authoritarianism (ACA)* framework. The framework conceptualises how governments continuously adapt communication institutions, technologies, and strategic practices in response to changing political, societal, and technological environments while preserving centralised authority over information, agenda setting, and political legitimacy.

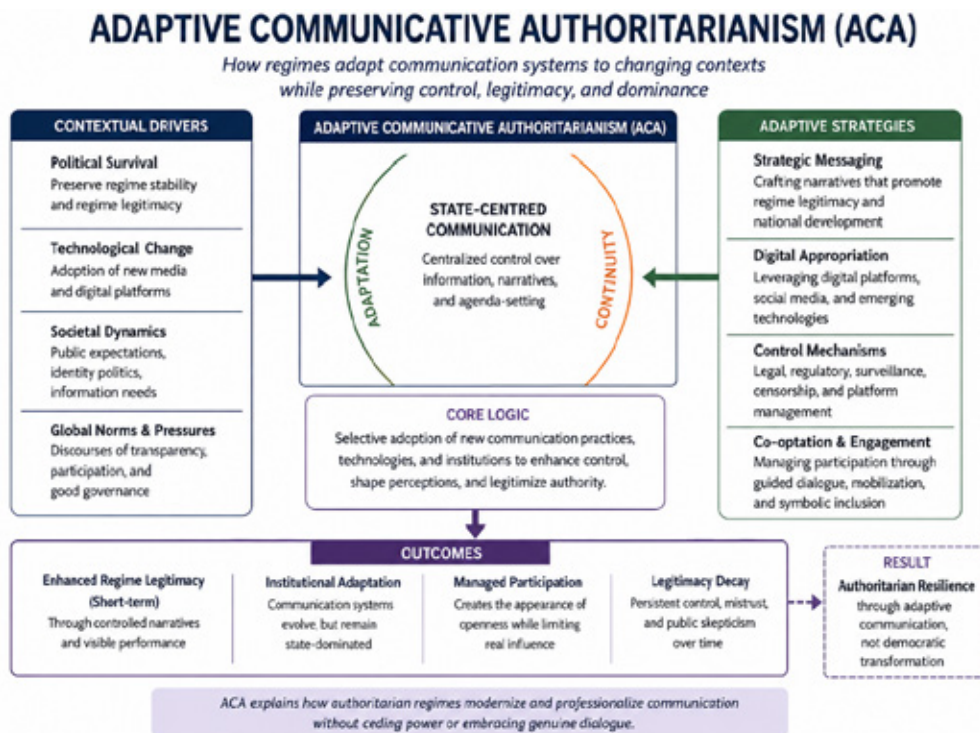


Figure 1: Proposed Adaptive Communicative Authoritarianism Model

Rather than viewing communication reform as a linear progression towards participatory governance, the framework (Figure 1) illustrates a cyclical process in which contextual pressures stimulate institutional adaptation,

strategic communication innovation, and technological appropriation without fundamentally altering the state's dominant role in public communication.

The resulting model explains how communication systems may become professionalised, digitally sophisticated, and rhetorically participatory while maintaining enduring patterns of state-centred governance. As such, the ACA framework provides a historically grounded and theoretically transferable lens for understanding government public relations in Ethiopia and other hybrid or postcolonial political systems undergoing institutional and digital transformation.

Conclusions

This study examined the historical evolution of GPR in Ethiopia from 1940 to 2024 and demonstrates that its development has been characterised less by democratic transformation than by institutional adaptation. Across successive political regimes, communication institutions underwent significant organisational restructuring, ideological reorientation, and technological modernisation. However, these changes did not fundamentally alter the state's dominant role in agenda setting, information management, and the construction of political legitimacy. Rather than representing discrete historical ruptures, the Imperial, Derg, EPRDF, and Prosperity Party administrations collectively illustrate a continuous process through which communication systems adapted to changing political, institutional, and technological contexts while preserving enduring patterns of state-centred governance.

The principal contribution of this study lies in the development of the concept of Adaptive Communicative Authoritarianism (ACA). The findings demonstrate that communication institutions can become professionalised, strategically coordinated, and digitally sophisticated without a corresponding shift towards genuinely dialogic or participatory government communication. By tracing the historical trajectory of Ethiopian government public relations across more than eight decades, the study extends existing theories of government communication beyond normative assumptions of progressive democratisation. Instead, it proposes that communication reform in hybrid and postcolonial political systems may be better understood as a process of adaptive institutional continuity, whereby new technologies, organisational reforms, and professional communication practices are incorporated into existing structures of political authority rather than replacing them.

The study also contributes to the growing body of scholarship on government communication and public administration in the Global South by demonstrating the importance of historically grounded and context-sensitive analyses of institutional change. The Ethiopian experience illustrates that communication reform is shaped not only by technological innovation or political transition but also by deeply embedded institutional legacies, administrative cultures, and state-building imperatives. Consequently, the study provides an analytical framework that may assist comparative investigations of government communication across other African and postcolonial contexts experiencing similar processes of political and digital transformation.

Notwithstanding these contributions, the study is limited by its reliance on historical documentary analysis. Although archival records, government publications, legislation, policy documents, and scholarly literature provide a robust basis for understanding institutional evolution, they cannot fully capture the perspectives and lived experiences of communication practitioners, policymakers, journalists, or citizens. Future studies should therefore complement documentary analysis with interviews, oral histories, ethnographic approaches, and mixed-methods designs to explore how communication reforms are implemented, interpreted, and experienced in practice.

Future research may examine the applicability of Adaptive Communicative Authoritarianism beyond the Ethiopian case. Comparative studies involving other African and Global South countries would provide valuable opportunities to assess whether similar trajectories of communication adaptation occur under different political and institutional conditions. Furthermore, emerging developments in artificial intelligence, algorithmic governance, platform regulation, digital public diplomacy, and generative communication technologies present important avenues for extending the conceptual framework proposed in this study. Examining how these technologies reshape the relationship between governments, digital platforms, and citizens will not only refine the explanatory power of Adaptive Communicative Authoritarianism but also contribute to broader debates concerning state legitimacy, digital governance, and the future of government public relations in increasingly networked societies.

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