

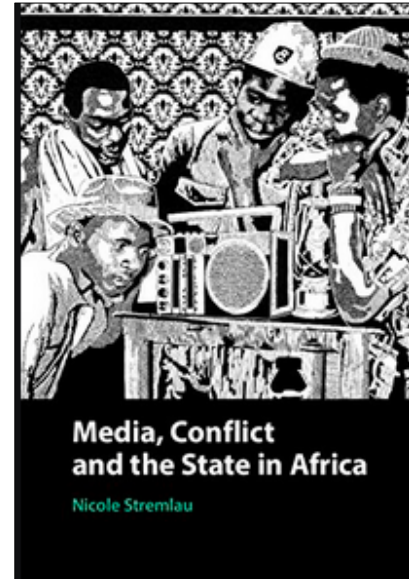
Nicole Stremmlau, **Media, Conflict and the State in Africa**, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 192 pp., \$83.87 (hardcover), \$29.99 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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What if the media scape of Eastern Africa—specifically Ethiopia and Uganda—were examined on their own terms? How might we differently understand the ways that media function as a tool for nation building after years of conflict? What if long histories of invasions, wars, and development schemes—but also song, performance, oration, and texts—were drawn together to produce a complex background from which we could understand contemporary journalism and media in the region? Nicole Stremmlau’s **Media, Conflict and the State in Africa** takes on this charge, arguing from the start that the region was not a blank slate onto which new media programs might be grafted. Rather, it is a complex space into which colonialism, development, Cold War politics, and contemporary social media have contributed to a complex, vibrant media scene.



The author is head of the Programme in Comparative Media Law and Policy at the Center for Socio-Legal Studies at the University of Oxford. She also holds an additional post as research professor in the humanities at the University of Johannesburg. She has conducted extensive research in the areas of journalism, law, and media, and has consulted for the World Bank and Human Rights Watch, a complex background that lends solidly to this text that focuses on Ethiopia and Uganda. This book breaks new ground by taking Ethiopia and Uganda at the center of its analysis. This is not a book that applies a Western theory to a distant nation. Instead, Ethiopia and Uganda are front and center. International theories and debates are indeed present, but within the context of these nations. In doing so, the text examines how governments have used communication tools to advance political agendas and have built ICT infrastructure to support nation building. The author addresses mediascapes within their own complex national background, as well as within historical and contemporary political milieu.

In *Media, Conflict and the State in Africa*, focused primarily on print media, Stremmlau argues that a concentration on journalism and media institutions is one way to “dewesternize media studies” (p. 7) by focusing instead on how journalism affects institutional learning, and the effects of media on citizenship. She rejects the predictions that many colonial and development programs have made regarding the need to establish a continual string of new programming and education practices. Instead, she argues for studies that address the long history of journalism, along with the rich traditions of song, performance, oration, and text that exist in both Ethiopia and Uganda. In taking this approach, she places journalism at the center of her study and examines how new governments have used journalism and the media as a place for adversaries to continue their internal battles while reaching a broader public. In these internal battles, interlocutors are seen to draw from national law, historical precedence, development programs, media, civic education, and

international connections to advance their own agendas and nation-building projects. This method, according to the author, will create a superior understanding of media specifically in Ethiopia and Uganda, rather than drawing false parallels with Western media.

Streamlau provides two grounding chapters: chapter 1, "Introduction," and chapter 2, "Between Authoritarian Politics and Free Expression." She then divides the bulk of her text into case studies of Ethiopia (chapters 3–5) and Uganda (chapters 6–8). The text ends with chapter 9, "Conclusion." Regarding Ethiopia, Streamlau tracks the framework of ideas, institutions, insurgencies, and history. She is concerned with political movements, how they have come to power, and the approach that development organizations have taken in their interactions with the state after that power emerged. Among the questions she asks is how the private media have been encouraged and supported by the state, and in what ways discourse between private media sources could provide a lens into the negotiations happening at both the local and nation–state building levels.

This division of analysis between Ethiopia and Uganda allows readers to understand the strong ties in the region, while also analyzing the uniqueness of each case. While two nations are examined in this book, it is not simply a comparative case study. On one side of the spectrum, Streamlau attentively reviews the work of quantitative comparative case studies, and on the other, qualitative ethnographies. She uses her work to find a methodological middle way, demonstrating the complexity of case studies that is often overlooked by other texts. Using this methodology, Ethiopia and Uganda are examined individually and as nations in the same region that share some, but certainly not all, historical events. Among the critical differences that factor into her study are the contemporary use of social media. In Ethiopia, media control and surveillance radically increased after the 2005 elections. At that time, communication was highly monopolized by the state. Comparatively, in Uganda, the government has closed social media access during elections, but (as of press in 2018) did not have many other controls. Streamlau asks how these two different policies on social media access have developed—and how they can be understood within both an East African and a global context.

In each section and chapter, she highlights critical moments when ideas regarding civil rule, institutions both past and present, and interests in governance and development change for the nation, population, and outside stakeholders. For example, within Ethiopia, she examines how the ideas of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front and President Meles Zenawi have become more influential following his death. And, in Uganda, she explores how newspapers such as *Uganda Resistance News* played on the ideas of freedom of expression, which were then adopted by the National Resistance Movement (NRM) propaganda methods, explaining how different the state would operate if Obote's regime were overthrown. These are only two of the many times in which Streamlau carefully explains and expounds upon *ideas*. This organizational structure provides a running thread that helpfully signposts her arguments, foreshadows arguments to come, and reminds the reader of connections between otherwise seemingly distant events.

Additional attention is paid to the innerworkings of political parties, and their direct engagement with journalism. She addresses what outside scholars might label as a paradox—that repressive governments have tolerated (to various degrees) free press. Among the explanations she explores is that media can serve as a critical form for intra-elite negotiation. She also investigates the ways that media can be a foundation for trust building between journalists and the state, as well as between the state and citizens. For example, in Uganda, journalists, while controlled by the state, report their belief that they may have a fair trial should they encounter

legal trouble. However, in Ethiopia, Steamlau reports that a void has emerged regarding private journalism—while government newspapers are strong, the nation lacks a set of journalists who are willing or able to directly challenge the government. Many journalists who have been accused of a crime prefer to go into exile rather than face trial.

Both nations have emerged from civil wars, and have a history of guerilla warfare, followed by the emergence of charismatic leaders who have strongly leaned on populism and identity groups. Additionally, both are strong one-party states, with leanings toward Marxism and Leninism, that have also benefited from exceptionally strong economic growth and rapid growth of cellular access. All of these factors have put new pressures on politicians to regulate information access, while also exploiting the potential to directly deliver their messages to citizens. These factors, as indicated by Steamlau, do not always add up with Western predictions for how political authority should operate, nor how freedom of the press might emerge. How, she asks, do these two nations, which almost border each other, have such different experiences regarding freedom of the press?

Throughout her text, Steamlau asks what went wrong and right in each case. She focuses on journalism and the relationships between journalists, politicians, and the courts. Her evidence is drawn from print archives, oral history interviews with journalists, and her own experiences working in the region. She argues that while it might have seemed relevant to also include radio archives in this data set (and radio is at times addressed), print journalism has been the driver for other media production in these countries—so addressing print gets to the source of what is also transmitting on radio.

In her conclusion, Steamlau compellingly argues that the findings regarding Ethiopia and Uganda apply to several discrete groups. They inform academic understanding of individual countries. But they also go further, pointing to new ways in which journalism and the media in East Africa can be better examined, understood, and supported. And her findings form a persuasive, necessary argument against the application of Western presumptions of journalism, media promotion, and development projects that have been, and still are, active in the region. From her in-depth analysis of the region's history, contemporary media use, and future potentials, Steamlau has demonstrated what excellent media and journalism analysis can and should look like across the African continent and developing world.