Somali web sites, history and politics

Abdisalam M. Issa-Salwe and Anthony Olden

Centre for Information Management, Thames Valley University, London, UK

Abstract

Purpose – The collapse of the Somali Democratic Republic in 1991 led to a world-wide diaspora. The purpose of this paper is to discuss and analyse Somali web sites in an attempt to demonstrate how they reflect the troubled history and politics of the homeland and continue to interest, involve, bring together and divide Somalis world-wide.

Design/methodology/approach – Web sites were divided into categories, and a study of the community/political category was conducted. Visits were made to the Horn of Africa and elsewhere, and face-to-face interviews conducted. E-mail contact was maintained with a number of Somali webmasters.

Findings – Community/political web sites was the most numerous category, with the majority being named after a geographical area associated with a group of clan lineages or sub-lineages. They contain news, opinion pieces and other features in Somali and on some web sites in Somali and English. While web sites usually declare that the opinions in articles are those of the authors alone, they are unlikely to publicise views with which they are not in agreement.

Originality/value – The paper illustrates how web sites enable members of one diaspora community to keep in touch with a political situation at home that is exceptional, and to involve themselves in its controversies, should they wish to do so. It also shows how the web site has brought a new dimension to traditional methods of feuding.

Keywords Worldwide Web, History, Politics, Deportation, Somalia

Paper type Research paper

> Warbaa ugu gaaja wayn.
> Information hunger is the worst hunger (Somali saying).

Introduction

The Somali State collapsed in 1991, and the country has never had a proper functioning central government since. War and famine led to the displacement of many Somalis – both within their own country and elsewhere. The diaspora accounts for as much as one-fifth of the entire population, including the majority of educated professionals. In addition to the Horn of Africa and adjoining areas, they can be found in most parts of the world including the UK (which controlled what was British Somaliland in colonial times), Italy (which controlled what was Italian Somalia), the USA, Canada, the Nordic countries and the Gulf. Consciousness of their cultural and religious background brings with it a reluctance to adopt certain aspects of the lifestyles of Western host nations, but Somali adaptation to modern information and telecommunications technology is striking. Somalis became enthusiastic users of mobile telephones from their earliest days in the West. Somali professionals and students in the diaspora became equally enthusiastic about the internet (Olden, 1999). A means of communication and a source of information for everyone, for certain groups the

internet is also an opportunity to promote political identity and their particular point of view through a new medium. A good example of this is www.somalilandforum.org, a web site that describes itself as "a non-partisan independent think-tank . . . that brings together Somalilanders, mainly in the Diaspora". The Somali web sites that have sprung up in various parts of the world depict a deeply divided society, one that is at the same time both integrated and fragmented. Political events that take place at home are analysed and argued about by diaspora members internationally.

The diaspora has been in existence for longer than the Somali State, which set itself up as a republic in 1960 after the territories under British and Italian control received their independence and merged. On its collapse in 1991 the North-West (the former British Somaliland) seceded as the Republic of Somaliland, although its existence as a sovereign state is still not recognised in Africa or elsewhere. But Somalis have lived and worked outside their peninsula in North-East Africa long before the British, Italians, French and Ethiopians divided it up between themselves in the late nineteenth century. Diaspora members helped foster national and pan-Somali sentiments in the 1940s: pan-Somali because they wanted all Somalis to be within the borders of one state, a Greater Somalia. Despite this ambition the Somali Republic that came into existence in 1960 was never to include the substantial Somali populations of French Somaliland (now Djibouti), Ethiopia (the Ogaden region), and Kenya (the Northern Frontier District, now North-Eastern Province). The decision that the borders of newly-independent Kenya in 1963 would continue to include Kenyan Somalis led to a major dispute, while the Ogaden was the cause of a war between Somalia and Ethiopia in 1977/1978 (Issa-Salwe, 2000; Lewis, 1993; Lewis, 2002).

Those driven into exile by war do not forget the experience. The original cause of displacement is remembered and the grievance passed on to the next generation (Volkan, 1997). According to Lyons (2004):

> Conflict-generated diaspora groups are not societies to promote Esperanto or to study long gone cultures. They are social networks that link past conflict, the contemporary challenges of living in a host state, and an aspiration of return to a particular piece of territory that is the symbolically important homeland.

He points out the advantages that cheap Internet communication and inexpensive telephone calls have for diaspora members.

In the long struggle that led to liberation from Ethiopian rule in 1991 the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front received significant financial assistance from Eritrean émigrés in the USA and Europe (Pool, 2001). Sri Lankan Tamils in the diaspora currently contribute money to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the north and east of the island), or at any rate to development projects there, as well as to family members. Somalis send US$1 billion home every year, and according to Ahmed (2006) the Somali economy is more dependent on remittances than any other in the world. In addition to supporting family members Somalis also support development projects. But there is one difference in particular between the Somali, pre-independence Eritrean and present day Tamil Eelam situations. The Eritreans wanted their own nation state, and finally achieved it. The Tamil Tigers continue to fight for the same objective (Tamil Eelam Home Page, n.d.). Somalia failed as a nation state: the allegiance of Somalis is primarily to the clan.

Design/methodology/approach

The collapse of the Somali State led to a crisis where social norms became void and individuals were left mentally and morally confused. It sent Somalis back to their roots, including the clan roots that President Mohamed Siyad Barre had officially renounced ("socialism unites, kinship divides") but unofficially exploited. Web sites are one way in which identities can be constructed and reconstructed. Somali web sites have proliferated in recent years, especially outside Somalia itself as the fee for web hosting must be paid in foreign currency. Somali web sites – and community/political web sites in particular – are a relatively new genre and worth investigating in order to discover how they interest, involve, bring together and divide Somalis worldwide.

This research addresses the following questions:

RQ1. Into what categories can Somali web sites be divided?

RQ2. What are the characteristics of the community/political type of web site?

RQ3. How do these community/political web sites reflect the dynamics of Somali politics and the continuing conflict at home?

RQ4. For which audiences are they intended?

The research approach combines aspects of virtual ethnography, content analysis, and traditional survey methods such as face-to-face interviewing of key individuals: for example, ten well-known writers and 15 young web site reporters attending the Somali-speaking Writers PEN Club conference in Djibouti, 24-25 June 2003; and Mohamed Hassan Alto, a Somali university lecturer, in 2006. The participants for the PEN meeting came from Mogadishu, Somaliland, Puntland (North-East Somalia), Ethiopia, Kenya, Sweden, the UK and South Africa, in addition to the Republic of Djibouti itself. Five steps for a critical virtual ethnography are specified by Hair and Clark (2003):

(1) Identify proactive communities.

(2) Negotiate access.

(3) Contact.

(4) Electronic depth interview.

(5) Return results and analysis to the community.

Gaining entry into the Somali web site community presented no problems as one of the authors is himself a Somali web site master. This enabled the research to go well beyond "lurking" and content analysis. One webmaster (www.somalitalk.com) even proposed the use of his site for a web survey. According to Hair and Clark (2003) "conventional ethnographic and virtual ethnographic practice alike use interviews to facilitate an understanding of meaning". Electronic and face-to-face contact with a number of key individuals was maintained during the course of this research. Findings are being passed on to participants through e-mail and other ways.

According to Robson (2002, p. 352) content analysis – like virtually all the techniques covered in his *Real World Research* – is "codified common sense". Krippendorff (cited in Stemler, 2001) identifies "the context relative to which the data are analysed" as one of the questions to be addressed in content analysis. Somalis are

acutely conscious of their history, especially their recent history. Some Somali historical and political background is essential for an understanding of web site content and perspectives, and this is supplied. Content analysis in this paper is not about word frequency but about whether the content of articles, letters, news and other items of the web sites investigated is politically neutral or politically slanted. Two particularly controversial issues have been selected to provide focus:

(1) The attempt by Somaliland to secede from Somalia and to establish itself as an independent state (1991 to date).

(2) The conflict in the south between the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the Islamists, and the involvement of Ethiopian troops to support the TFG (2006 to date).

It is important to note that the number of web sites fluctuates all the time. In mid-2004, for example, over 400 were identified (Issa-Salwe, 2007). Many of these are no longer in existence, but new web sites are continually being set up and another count in 2007 came up with 745.

The clan in Somali society

According to their mythology the Somalis are descended from intermarriage between immigrants from the Arabian Peninsula and the indigenous Bantu or Oromo people of the hinterland. But Issa-Salwe (1996) points out that research in recent decades has established that ethnically and culturally Somalis belong to the Eastern Cushitic group. The traditional structure of Somali society is traced through an elaborate genealogy to two brothers, Soomaal (also known as Samaale) and Sab. The followers of Soomaal for the most part led a pastoral-nomadic life whilst the followers of Sab exercised an agro-nomadic one. The Dir, Daarood, Isaaq and Hawiye clan-families are the descendants of Soomaal. The Rahanweyn and Digil are descendants of Sab. The majority of the Somali population is made up of these six clans, but they can be divided further. The Dir, for example, are divided into the Issa and Gadabursi sub-clans. The Daarood are divided into the Mijerteyn, the Dulbahante, the Warsangeli, the Marrehen and the Ogaden. In addition there are a number of smaller groups, such as the Midgaan, historically considered a lower caste because the men worked as barbers or hunters.

Pastoralists need access to water and grass for their flocks, and both can be in short supply in the harsh environment of the Somali peninsula. This can lead to conflict over resources. Feuding is a regular occurrence. Writing about life in the interior at the end of the nineteenth century, Samatar (1982, p. 109) summed it up as continuing "as it had before with its cycle of camel husbandry and hereditary feuds". Somali inter-clan conflict is centred on feuds. The aim is to injure or eliminate the hostile clan, to seek revenge, to reverse wrongs, and to protect one's own clan's rights to resources. Because nomads move continuously, a clan may migrate into the territory of its neighbour. Sometimes more than one clan migrates over a given territory, and lineages mix with each other in pastures. These movements are influenced by the change of season from wet to dry and back again, which creates periodic changes in settlement patterns. The dry seasons (December to March and July to September) are hard for pastoralists and their herds. The migrating groups are concentrated at permanent watering places. The greater the competition for scarce resources, the greater the hostility amongst various

clan groups is likely to be. In the case of conflict within the clan or outside it, elders of a third party or sometimes from the feuding factions meet in the traditional assembly (*shir*) to defuse antagonism. If a member of one clan kills or injures a member of another, the case may be settled by the collective paying of the blood-guilt fine or healing fine to the bereaved or injured lineage.

Traditionally, the lineage is answerable for all the external actions of its members, and at the same time it is held liable for their settlement. Feuds have norms of retaliation. Once adopted these norms exert a certain degree of control over behaviour related to self-esteem. In the case of balancing reciprocal blood payments, it may be that a next of kin of the deceased will take immediate action, and tradition encourages this. The brothers or cousins will take revenge into their own hands. Unsettled disputes cause rancour, which may be increased by ecological competition (Issa-Salwe, 1996).

Every male in the clan lineage is identified through his father and is thereby linked to the line of descent (Lewis, 1994). Somali culture is oral rather than written. Through the practice of memorising and reciting the names of one's forefathers, when a man dies he remains in the consciousness of the lineage members because his place in the descent line is fixed. If the cause of the death was a feud killing, this too will live on in the memory of his clan. The resort to force is the standard procedure expected to be used in the case of a feud killing. It is normal to retaliate in these circumstances. The bereaved kin will feel offended and lacking in respect and dignity: to restore status they have to retaliate. The sooner a reckoning takes place the stronger and more confident the wronged family feels. Sometimes a poet of the lineage might compose a poem which incites his lineage to retaliate for the killed kin and thus regain its status. The victim may become immortalised through the words of the poet. In the case of external threat, however (for example, a threat from another clan), feuding lineages of the same clan will set aside their antagonism and unite in common defence.

A British journalist reporting from the capital, Mogadishu, following the overthrow of the president, Mohamed Siyad Barre, in 1991, observed a queue of civilians waiting to pass through a roadblock manned by rebels (Hartley, 2004, p. 184):

> As each person was waved through, another came forward and began uttering a litany of names. My guide with the flaming red hair said the people were reciting their clan family trees. The genealogies tumbled back generation after generation to a founding ancestor. It was like a DNA helix, or a fingerprint, or an encyclopedia of peace treaties and blood debts left to fester down the torrid centuries. I was thinking how poetic this idea was, when *bang!*, a gunman shot one of the civilians, who fell with blood gushing from his head and was pushed aside onto a heap of corpses.

> "Wrong clan," said my flaming-haired friend. "He should have borrowed the ancestors of a friend."

It is said that while male allegiance runs vertically in society, thus tending to divide it, women's allegiance can run horizontally. When a woman belongs to one clan and marries into another it helps to unify society.

Information, communication and poetry

Yaa warkii bi'in oo war haya (Whoever could give us information, be blessed) is a Somali saying. When people met on the road, in tea stalls or elsewhere, a request for information was always the first part of the interaction. The accuracy of the

information was important. *Wargalnimo* means information handling, and Somali culture attaches responsibility to it. Traditionally, a man who was incapable of handling information well lost face and became *gabadhaa guurwaa* (he whose daughter would not be married). Somali interest in information and communication is behind the growth in telecommunications, the one area of development that has expanded since the outbreak of the civil war in 1991. Although development projects have been neglected in much of the country, the supply of mobile telephones, fax machines and internet access has grown. In Europe and North America many Somalis own shops that contain telephone booths for calls back home and elsewhere. In addition to cheap international telephone calls, these shops sell telephone cards, mobile telephones and internet access.

The enthusiasm with which Somalis have taken to modern telecommunications can be attributed to the oral nature of their society. Somali itself was not promulgated as a written-down language until 1972. Before this literate Somalis wrote in Arabic or in English or Italian, the colonial languages. In the 1930s, for example, opposition to the proposal to use written Somali in the first government school to be established in British Somaliland was so strong that the plan had to be abandoned. Religious leaders maintained that the proper written language of instruction for Muslim boys was Arabic, the language of the Koran, and the British director of education was forced to acquiesce (Olden, 2008).

Verbal art is the basis of Somali traditional culture, and Somali poetry was oral – it was not written down. Afrax (2000) points out that oral poetry, oral narrative, proverbs and words of wisdom were an integral part of every aspect of daily life: everything from herding livestock or sewing mats to debating issues or organizing feuds. The Victorian explorer and writer Richard Burton (Burton and Burton, 1987, pp. 81-82), who travelled through Somali country in the 1850s, thought it strange that a language "which has no written character should so abound in poetry and eloquence...The country teems with poets". According to Lewis (1986, p. 139), poets and poetry reciters have "a memorized repertoire extending up to 15 hours of 'playback' time".

Poetic duels are a feature of Somali life and culture. During the early years of the civil war a large amount of poetry was produced by the warring groups, in particular by the Abgal and the Habargidir (both of the Hawiye clan family) who fought for the control of Mogadishu. Other poetic duelling went on between the Harti Daarood and the Ogaden Daarood during the fighting for the control of Kismayo, a port city in the south. Inflammatory poems circulated on audio tape, but have not found their way on to the Internet to any great extent, and this is difficult to understand. One Somali university lecturer (Mohamed Hassan Alto) interviewed suggested that as the task of the cultural/literary category of web site is to preserve and disseminate Somali culture, the aim is to preserve the positive and reject the negative image created by civil war.

Web site categories
1. Professional/business
Main features: professional/business activities. Examples of these web sites include the Somali Medical Association of North America (www.somalimedicalassociation nordamerica.com/) and Dahabshiil (www.dahabshiil.com/). Dahabshiil is a major conduit through which diaspora members send remittances to family in the Horn of Africa. War-torn areas and refugee camps do not have conventional banking facilities,

and the Somalis have developed their own effective substitutes. According to Dahabshiil's web site it has more than 300 payout locations in the Horn: "since its founding in 1970, it has developed innovative money transfer services that provide a lifeline to millions of Somalis".

2. Online news
Main features: news (text, audio or both). These web sites publish their own news material and occasionally link to other publication agencies' sites. Some are online versions of newspapers published inside or outside Somalia. Others are online alone, such as the Dhambaal News Network: www.dhambaalnews.com/ These web sites and those in the community/political category overlap because both tend to have their own particular perspective when it comes to politics.

3. Radio
Main features: news (audio or video). These are usually the web front of radio stations either inside or outside Somalia. Radio stations have been set up where large Somali communities exist, for example, in Gothenburg (Sweden) and Copenhagen (Denmark). *Codka Beesha* (community voice) is an example from Canada: Radio Codka Beesha ee Toronto & AllSomali Radio (www.allsomali.com/Radiocodkabeesha-ID-Toronto-March-19-2006.html). Like the BBC Somali Service and other radio broadcasts one can now listen to the news via the web site at any convenient time through podcasts. Audio facilities are now used by other web categories, so that one can listen to music, interviews, literary readings and religious sermons.

4. Personal
Main features: personal information. According to Erickson (1996) "personal pages and the Worldwide Web are not being used to 'publish information'; they are being used to construct identity – useful information is just a side effect". The majority of Somali personal web sites are created by amateurs, sometimes by students as a way to improve their web design skills. Many are poorly designed with heavily added graphical images. They are hosted under free domains and are the least often updated of all web categories. With their photographs and biographical information they have much in common with the personal web sites of any other group, but they also link to the Somali past. Abdi Ali Musse's curriculum vitae, for example, points out that his university studies in English and Arabic in Somalia were interrupted by the civil war (www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/6521/me.html).

5. Religious
Main features: Islamic religious material mainly for learning and teaching. The religious sites attribute the Somali crisis to be a direct consequence of deserting Islamic values for the pursuit of a tradition that advocates violence and sectionalism. They maintain that this is what led Somalis to "stray" from the road of Allah. As a consequence, Allah is more severe on Somalis. They believe that punishment is more severe for believers than for non-believers. The non-believers are punished only in the next world, while the stray Muslim will suffer both in this world and in the next. Contrary to this view, cultural/literary web sites link the problem to the introduction of alien cultures into Somali society.

Religious web sites have similar features to cultural/literary ones except that they differ in their mode of appeal and style of approach. While the cultural/literary appeal to the shared and common heritage of Somali language and culture, the religious sites concentrate on Islam, the other heritage of the Somalis. By providing Islamic teaching material and information, they appeal to the individual and community on moral grounds. While the religious sites use appeals to God, the cultural sites make use of a mixture of amiability and a sense of belonging. Religious web sites tend to be named after Islamic places (for example, the Khalid Mosque, www.khalidmosque.org/en/index.php?newlang = eng), or historic events.

6. Cultural/literary
Main features: Somali culture, literature and art. Most categories of Somali web sites devote space to culture and literature. However, some such as www.golkhatumo.com/maqal.htm and www.doollo.com/ ("the largest online collection of Somali poetry") are dedicated entirely to this field, although they are few in number. Some are used to preserve Somali literature and culture following the collapse of the State. Others are used to promote a separate identity. The former are mainly associated with pastoral society.

7. Community/political
Main features: online news (including community information), political analysis/opinion, culture, literary and art sections, chat room, religious material and teaching, advertisements/business information, mailing list. These are community sites and they use almost all web features, the most important of which is online news. They are updated far more frequently than other web sites. Some have a "song of the day", a reminder of the oral nature of Somali culture. Because this is the largest and most political category of Somali web site it will be treated in more detail. One can subdivide it into two sub-groups: one based on region, clan or community and hence sub-national, the other a group that attempts to transcend such divisions. The first sub-group can be identified as a front for one of the units or constituents that came into existence following the breakdown of the Somali Republic:

- The secessionist Republic of Somaliland in the North-West, dominated by the Isaaq clan-family.

- The semi-autonomous region of Puntland in the North-East, dominated by the Daarood clan-family.

- The Rahanweyn Resistance Army, which draws its support from the Bay and Bakool communities who live between the Shebelle and Juba rivers in the south; this area is dominated by the Digil and Mirifle clan-family.

- Benadir and Central Somalia, dominated by the Hawiye clan-family under various groups. From 1991 onwards warlords and their militias were in control until early 2006 when Hawiye under the banner of the Union of Islamic Courts took over.

- The minority (or movements) constituency. Although the minorities are scattered, their common experience leads them to voice their feelings on a common ground.

For the individual Somali the breakdown of the State in 1991 meant a return to his clan area. Lineage identity and territoriality were reaffirmed. The web provides a means for group expression and promotion, and the web site name is important because it identifies the group, perhaps through a geographical reference such as a region, town or village, for example www.somalilandforum.com or www.dayniileone.com. Web sites usually state that the opinions contained in a contribution are solely those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the editorial views of the site. In practice, however, if a site is unsympathetic to a writer's opinions it is unlikely to publish them.

The secession of Somaliland (1991 to date)

Emotional language is common in many community/political web sites, and the secession of Somaliland has given rise to plenty of emotion, as in the following example (Samater, 2005):

> In the cyber world, if you post...your political concern about ...Somali unity to the countless Somali webs, secessionist and aggressive cyber political hooligans will bomb you with hateful emails like the following which I received from one who is literally suffering from what I can call "Somaliland syndrome" . . . Mean boy, scums like you must be suffering from a profound inferior complex for not belonging to the noble and supreme nation of Reer Sheekh Isxaaq [the Isaaq clan-family], who first came up with the very idea of Somaliweyn back in the fifties, and sacrificed their independence and freedom for that . . . We proved to the whole world that we can win both war and peace. That is why the Republic of Somaliland will sooner or later be politically recognized, no matter what minor MIDGAAN [members of a lower caste] like you say or do. Did I tell you that you are a born loser . . .?

Somaliland web sites differ from those that can be identified with the rest of Somalia. The community/political ones can be divided into those named after the region, such as www.somalilandforum.com, and those named after a group or local area, such as www. widhwidh.com. The first group supports the independence of Somaliland. The second group can be further divided into those like www.awdalnews.com that also support independence, and those like www.widhwidh.com that favour the unity of Somalia as a whole. The reason for the second sub-group's support of Somali unity is that it is associated with the main clan-family of Puntland, with which Somaliland shares a border. Although Somaliland has been largely peaceful since its secession in 1991, there has been unrest in its eastern regions of Sool and Sanaag, to which Puntland lays claim. Territorial borders in Africa are often little more than straight lines drawn on inaccurate maps by colonial powers a century or more ago. These are particularly inappropriate for the Somalis, nomads who moved with their flocks in search of water and pasture. The clans in Sool and Sanaag are linked to Puntland: the Warsangeli and the Dhulbahante, which along with the Majerteen form the Harti sub-group of the Daarood clan-family.

Sool and Sanaag East-related web sites such as www.widhwidh.com aside, most Somaliland community/political web sites have two objectives. They promote national awakening within the community inside and outside the area, and they campaign for the recognition of the State, which in fact did have international recognition for several days in 1960. British Somaliland became independent on 26 June 1960 and entered into the formation of the Somali Republic with Italian Somalia five days later – when the latter gained its independence on 1 July. That decision was summed up by Somaliland Forum in 2000 as a "horrible mistake". The web site campaigns for the return of the

sovereign status once held for so brief a period. In a press release attacking "yet another reconciliation conference…called in Mogadishu…by the same warlords and the same cash-hungry opportunists", Somaliland Forum (2007) proposed a number of steps including:

(1) Accept two nations with well-demarcated borders instead of relying on borderless warring tribes that only attract carnage.

(2) Accept the colonial borders as the solid and tangible basis of two sisterly nations emerging from the death of the Somali Republic, and accept the sanctity of borders of neighbouring countries of Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti. Any dreams of a greater Somali Republic have come and gone.

A reference to Somaliland newspapers may be pertinent here. In December 2003 Puntland forces took control of Lasanod, the capital of Somaliland's Sool region. Fighting took place in October 2004 in which a number of Somaliland and Puntland troops were killed. According to Höhne (2008, p. 106) the newspapers in the Somaliland capital, Hargeysa, sided unconditionally with the government and "never even tried to accommodate some more moderate or alternative views". He accuses them of deliberate misinformation, alleging that they would not hesitate to print propaganda in the defence of Somaliland's independence.

To enable its members to communicate and work together, Somaliland Forum provides a mailing service for its members. However membership is exclusive. A person wanting to join has to submit his or her request to an existing member. This is a form of vetting: it keeps the "wrong" people out.

As mentioned, the Somali diaspora contributes generously to family members and projects back home. Somaliland Forum became a focus for fund-raising for the University of Hargeysa Trust Fund, Farah Omar Secondary School, and the rebuilding of Burao Hospital and Hargeysa Psychiatric Hospital amongst other causes. Livestock is the main export, and another project was the campaign against the ban by Gulf States on animals from Somaliland because of their alleged infection with Rift Valley Fever.

The Transitional Federal Government, the Islamists and the Ethiopians (2006 to date)

It is common for Somali web sites to defend their group or alliance while vilifying the other side, and the conflict in southern Somalia has provided plenty of scope for impassioned debate in recent years, as well as for straightforward reporting of a professional standard. In 2005 the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) under President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed returned to Somalia from Kenya. Mogadishu had been under the control of various warlords since the breakdown of the State, and early in 2006 the TFG made the town of Baidoa the temporary seat of government.

However, in 2006 a movement known as the Islamic Courts Union wrested Mogadishu from the warlords and restored order to the city for the first time in years. The Islamists were associated with the Hawiye clan-family. Their power increased rapidly until they controlled most of Somalia apart from Somaliland and Puntland in the north and the rapidly diminishing areas in the hands of the TFG. The Islamists were alleged to have al-Qaeda links, which worried the United States, a country that has taken an interest in the Horn of Africa since the days of the

Emperor Haile Selassie. The TFG, gravely weakened, sought Ethiopian help. The arrival of Ethiopian troops was a sure way to antagonize many Somalis, given that the two countries are traditional enemies with long-standing border disputes that led to war in the 1970s. In late December 2006 the TFG and its Ethiopian allies routed the Islamists, who then turned to guerrilla warfare. Unsurprisingly the Islamists have the support of Eritrea, which fought a 30-year war to extricate itself from Ethiopian control, and then went to war again with Ethiopia between 1998 and 2000.

The conflict has caused much suffering. According to figures cited by Amnesty International (2008), approximately 6,000 civilians were killed in Mogadishu and elsewhere in southern and central Somalia in 2007, while over 600,000 people fled their homes. War crimes have been committed by combatants on all sides, although the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the criticism of its troops in the Amnesty International document as disgraceful: "our soldiers are the most disciplined soldiers in the world. They have never cut anybody's throat, never gang-raped any women, never deliberately shot civilians in Somalia" (*BBC News*, 2008). Just two weeks before the release of the report Ethiopian soldiers stormed al Hidaya Mosque in Mogadishu. Around 20 (the initial figure given was 11) people inside the mosque were killed, including the imam, according to Garowe Online (2008a, b). Some were shot, others had their throats cut. The story was covered by most Somali web sites, but from different perspectives. www.garoweonline.com and www.wardheernews.com abhorred what had happened while accusing both sides in the conflict. www.allpuntland.com ignored the event, while www.puntlandpost.com and www.carmooyin.com maintained that the Ethiopian action was purely defensive.

Conclusion

Ten years ago no more than a handful of Somali web sites existed. They have proliferated since then not just because the technology exists, but because they provide a platform that can link people scattered all over the world by the failure of a state and its tragic consequences. Community/political web sites are a contemporary platform for reporting, discussing, arguing and feuding. They are perfect for an oral culture such as the Somali.

In the 1940s emerging Somali nationalism sought to suppress clan politics of division and rivalry. Yet at the same time some groups continued on with their traditional interests, for example the Independent Constitutional Party, which represented the Digil and Mirifle clans of Italian-governed Somalia (Issa-Salwe, 1996). Nowadays, in the process of "re-inventing the clan", it is common for many community/political web sites to provide pictures of some of their prominent clan members. The picture of Aden Abdulle Osman, first president of the Somali Republic, has appeared on www.mudulood.com, as has that of General Daud Abdulle Hirsi, first commander of the Somali Military Force in the 1960s. The intention is to impress. By contrast, www.midgaan.com, which represents the marginalized, shows singers such as Omar Dhuulle, Mohamed Saleebaan and the legendary Maryan Mursal Issa. Literary and artistic figures receive great respect in Somali society, and this is an attempt by the web site to put on display the best of the Somali nation. The intention is to present themselves as people who suffered under pastoralist society, to counter the pastoralists' negative treatment.

In recent years the internet has become a major source of news for members of the diaspora. Web site hits increase when there are major incidents at home. News is the most important component of community/political web sites, and violent news is what attracts the most attention. Someone browsing is more inclined to trust what "his" web site puts out, and Somali web designers keep this in mind when they are designing their web sites and providing content for them. The internet creates a sense of belonging and a sense of sharing for Somalis, but it also fragments. Somali web sites tend to depict cultural homogeneity and the shared heritage of Islam, but they also portray political and social division. Cyberspace is the new battle front, with Somali web sites epitomizing the darker, more turbulent aspects as well as the positive sides of the Somali people.

References

Afrax, M.D. (2000), "Somali theatre", PhD thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, London.

Ahmed, I.I. (2006), "New regulations restrict Somali remittances", *id21 Insights: Communicating Development Research*, No. 60, available at: www.id21.org/insights/insights60/art04.html (accessed 11 August 2007).

Amnesty International (2008), *Routinely Targeted: Attacks on Civilians in Somalia*, Amnesty International, London, available at: www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR52/009/2008/en (accessed 14 June 2008).

BBC News (2008), "Somalia forces 'out of control'", 6 May, available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7385078.stm, (accessed 14 June 2008).

Burton, R.F. (1987), in Burton, I. (Ed.), *First Footsteps in East Africa, or, An Exploration of Harar*, Dover, New York (reprint of *The Memorial Edition of the Works of Captain Sir Richard F. Burton*, Tylston and Edwards, London, 1894, pp. 6-7).

Erickson, T. (1996), "The World Wide Web as social hypertext", available at: www.pliant.org/personal/Tom_Erickson/SocialHypertext.html (accessed 13 August 2007).

Garowe Online (2008a), "Ethiopian soldiers blamed for mosque massacre in Somalia", 21 April, available at: www.garoweonline.com/artman2/publish/Somalia_27/Ethiopia_soldiers_blamed_for_mosque_massacre_in_Somalia.shtml (accessed 13 June 2008).

Garowe Online (2008b), "Somalia's leader rejects mosque massacre allegations", 25 April, available at: www.garoweonline.com/artman2/publish/Somalia_27/Somalias_leader_rejects_mosque_massacre_allegations.shtml (accessed 14 June 2008).

Hair, N. and Clark, M. (2003), "An enhanced virtual ethnography: the role of critical theory", paper presented at Critical Management Studies Conference, Lancaster University, 7-9 July, available at: www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/ejrot/cmsconference/2003/proceedings/exploringthemeaning/Hair.pdf (accessed 11 August 2007).

Hartley, A. (2004), *The Zanzibar Chest: A Memoir of Love and War*, Harper Perennial, London.

Höhne, M.V. (2008), "Newspapers in Hargeysa: freedom of speech in post-conflict Somaliland", *Afrika Spectrum*, Vol. 43 No. 1, pp. 91-113, available at: www.puntlandpost.com (accessed 14 June 2008).

Issa-Salwe, A.M. (1996), *The Collapse of the Somali State: The Impact of the Colonial Legacy*, HAAN, London.

Issa-Salwe, A.M. (2000), *Cold War Fallout: Boundary Politics and Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, HAAN, London.

Issa-Salwe, A.M. (2007), "Electronic communication and an oral culture: the political dynamics of Somali websites and mailing lists", PhD thesis, Information Management, Thames Valley University, London.

Lewis, I. (1986), "Literacy and cultural identity in the Horn of Africa: the Somali case", in Baumann, G. (Ed.), *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp. 133-49.

Lewis, I.M. (1993), *Understanding Somalia: Guide to Culture, History and Social Institutions*, 2nd ed., HAAN, London.

Lewis, I.M. (1994), *Blood and Bone: The Call of Kinship in Somali Society*, Red Sea Press, Lawrenceville, NJ.

Lewis, I.M. (2002), *A Modern History of the Somali: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa*, 4th ed., James Currey, Oxford.

Lyons, T. (20074), "Engaging diasporas to promote conflict resolution: transforming hawks into doves", available at: www.tamilnation.org/conflictresolution/lyons.htm (accessed 11 August 2007).

Olden, A. (1999), "Somali refugees in London: oral culture in a western information environment", *Libri*, Vol. 49 No. 4, pp. 212-24.

Olden, A. (2008), "Somali opposition to government education: R.E. Ellison and the Berbera School affair, 1938-1940", *History of Education*, Vol. 37 No. 1, pp. 71-90.

Pool, D. (2001), *From Guerrillas to Government: The Eritrean People's Liberation Front*, James Currey, Oxford.

Robson, C. (2002), *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers*, 2nd ed., Blackwell, Oxford.

Samatar, S.S. (1982), *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism: The Case of Sayyid Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Somaliland Forum (2008), press release on the 15th Somalia Reconciliation Conference, 29 May, available at: http://somalilandforum.org/sl/2007/05/29/somaliland-forum-press-release/ (accessed 12 June 2008).

Stemler, S. (2001), "An overview of content analysis", *Practical Assessment, Research and Evaluation*, Vol. 7 No. 17, available at: http://pareonline.net/getvn.asp?v = 7&n = 17 (accessed 12 August 2007).

Tamil Eelam Home Page (n.d.), available at: www.eelam.com/ (accessed 11 August 2007).

Volkan, V.D. (1997), *Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, NY.

Corresponding author
Abdisalam M. Issa-Salwe can be contacted at: BinSalwe@yahoo.com