Paltalk forums as alternative public sphere and platforms for political discussion: A case study of Somali online community

Thesis credit

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Declaration

I, Umar Abdi Mohamed, declare that this thesis is a result of my research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

Signature………………………………..
Date…………………………………………

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Dedication

I proudly want to dedicate this thesis to my mother Udbi Abdi, My father Abdi for being a true inspiration in life, my sister Farhia Abdi, my two beautiful daughters (Salma, Sanaa and Safaa) and their mother Farhia Muse Mohamed. Thank you for all wonderful help, patience and kind love.

Abstract

In recent years, in internet online forums, specifically, those who provide audio and video communication have become an effective way of communicating with people from across the world in a short period of time. These forums also become effective in sending and receiving immediate feedbacks and comments just like a face to face meeting. In this way, the online forums have revolutionized the ways in which people interact, access information, and also comment on the social and political issue. In this light, that the internet, as argued by many, has facilitated new public sphere -online forums -where many people who might live in different parts of the world might be able to instantly meet and conduct discussions through which they can reach some consensus their common concern issues and possibly form a public opinion. Consequently, the forums on internet build a breaking for emergency of new public sphere and platforms for political discussions.

The Patalk is one of the leading internet websites that provides the people with hundreds of such online forums. However, questions can be asked about how the Paltalk forums which many consider as spaces where inane chatters congregate to only spend a time could fulfill Habermass preconditions for the public sphere to exist and become an inclusive arena of rational-critical debates. In trying, to address this question, the thesis attempts to explore the Paltalk forums and find out whether they might alternative public sphere and platforms for political discussion. It presents a qualitative case study of the Somali online community (SOC) who uses the Platalk forums and focuses two forums, (e.i. Qolka Guusha Dowlada Live wareeysi Gobalada Dalka (QGDWGD) and Qolka Qaranimada Umada iyo Midnimada Somaliyed (QQUMS).

Thus, in order to provide comprehensive insights and understanding of issue in focus, the thesis first explores the idea of the public sphere and relates it with social media sites (SMS). Then, it moves to explicate the public sphere in the Somali traditional context. In this explication, the thesis discusses three different arenas, the *madal*, *ardaa* and *Makhaayad*, which are very important meeting in Somali tradition. Afterwards, the thesis goes on presenting the case study of the research: *Paltalk forums as alternative public sphere and platforms for political discussion: A case study of Somali online community.*

The researcher argues that, two observed Paltalk forums Somali are alternative online public sphere and political platforms. But however he puts a question mark on generalizations of the results on entire Somalis since a huge portion of Somali people couldn't get access to the internet either because of their socioeconomic status or because they lack the skills to use the internet.

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List of Abbreviations

ARPCT	Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism
ICU	Islamic Courts Union
QGDWGD	Qolka Guusha Dowlada Live wareeysi Gobalada Dalka (Name)
QQUMS	Qolka Qaranimada Umada iyo Midnimada Somaliyed (Name)
SMS	Social Media Sites
SOC	Somali online community
SYL	Somali Youth League
TFG	Transnational Government

List of Somali concepts and words with English translation

Afhayeenka beesha	Spokesman of the clan
Ardaa	*Private Sphere of the family (Family domain)*
Arrimaha Reerka	Family affiars
Bacadle	Cloth merchants
Bantu	A caste groups living riverine area of southern Somalia
Birtume	Forgers
Bukaamo	Shops
Caleemosaar	Election
Currad	Happened before
Fadhi ku Dirir	Name given to Somali public sphere
Geel jire	Camel Herder
Gubaabo qabiil	Clan cheering
Guurti	Group of elders functioning like a senate or the *house of elders*
Jilbo (sing. Jilib)	Sub- Clan
Kabatole	Shoe-makers
Madal	Public arena, mainly under the shadow of tree, where *shirs* occur
Makhaayad	Tea shop
Midgan,Tumal &Yibir	Names given to Somali Caste groups
Qoysas sing.Qoys	Family
Reero (sing. Reer)	Clan
Shir	Meeting
Suuqa xoolaha	Animal markets
Ugub	Did not happen before
Wada-xaajood	Deliberations
Xeer	Customary legal system of Somalia
Xeer-beegti	Judiciary

1. Chapter one: Introduction

In the contemporary development of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), the internet dramatically transforms the ways in which individuals across the world obtain, create, and exchange huge amounts of information contents in a matter of few minutes (Tyler 2002). It is therefore one of the most important development in the contemporary communication which produced new public sphere (Ubayasiri 2006) where individuals meet on the net in groups to share their ideas, express their arguments and comment on social and political issues without any obstruction and selection or censorship. Thus, circulations of information are very fast and massively available on the websites.

Today, the internet is heralded as a "widespread global information infrastructure, and connectivity is usually referred to more broadly as a network or network infrastructure" (McLennan 2008:205) as it has created new types of social connections between people who are members of the online "virtual communities" (Rheingold 1993). Rheingold (1993:xx) calls this virtual community a "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace". According to Nwokeafor (2015:21) "a virtual community is a social network of individuals who interact through specific [online] media, potentially crossing geographical and political boundaries in order to pursue mutual interests or goals". One the most pervasive online media used by the virtual community is the Social Media Sites (here after SMS) which provide highly interactive platforms through which individual members of virtual communities can instantly discuss issues of their mutual interests or pursue their goals. Transcending barriers of time, space and distance, the SMS used by the virtual communities has become a key coordinating factor for "nearly all of the world's political movements" (Shirky 2010:2). For instance, they played an instrumental role in organizing the masses that participated in various rallies and protests which took place different places of the world. Among the most prominent protests that SMS has evidently played an influential role include the Iranian Green Movement, Ukrainian "Euromaidan" protests, and the extraordinary wave of the popular protests of the Arab-spring revolution which swept across many Arab countries in 2011 (Aday et al. 2012).

The Paltalk is one of the popular SMS which hosted significant traffic, particularly during the Arab Spring. It provides online chat rooms which allow many people to engage in voice, video and text chats in real-time (Shaer 2012). The Paltalk hosts today world's largest online video chat community on the internet (Conforti 2007). On it, there are thousands (if not millions) of online chat rooms and great numbers of these chat rooms are created by regular individual citizens, activists or civil society organizations from the non-democratic third world countries where participations in the political activities are restricted or denied mainstream of publics. The Somali online community (here after SOC) is one the active virtual communities who have been using the Paltalk chat rooms since it was invented. For many of them, Paltalk chat rooms (here after Paltalk forums) are essential platforms in which they conduct discussion on various public issues and themes which are related to the current situation of their country and also in their host country (in the case of the diasporas).

1.1   The objective and questions of the Research

The main objective of this thesis is to observe whether the Paltalk forums might be regarded as an alternative public sphere and political platforms in the Somali online community (SOC). With the collapse of the military regime and the disappearance of its state from the international scene, Somalia has been branded since 1991 as the most failed state in the modern history world. This experience, which is seen as a unique phenomenon in this nation-state era, was expected to leave country "out of the loop" of new global technologies, markets, politics, and cultures" (Issa-Salwe 2011:54). However, contrary to this expectation, Somalia and its people have never been so excluded. In fact, with the impact of globalization, the internet has presented opportunities for many of them, mainly those in the Diaspora, to communicate, re-group and share opinions with each other (Issa-Salwe 2011). The Paltalk is one of the websites that Somalis have used as communication medium, source of information and platforms for discussions. For many of them, the Platalk forums are open spaces for public debate. On an average mid day, the number of the Paltalk forums used by Somalis reaches around 70-90 forums with some of them over 200 active members.

Although, use of the Paltalk forums by the Somalis is an emerging social phenomenon, yet no research, specifically focusing on the issue, has been conducted, as a result it remains un-researched area. Thus, because of that lack of academic studied, this research takes steps to observe the case. It aims, by using qualitative research methods, to conduct a case study on

the SOC who uses the Paltalk. Specifically, the research places a focus on two of the most populated Somali Paltalk forums (see section 2.3), which are purposefully established for political discussions. These forums are open and allow their users to air their views and freely address their political opinion.

In order to address, the objective of the study, the research attempts to answer one research main research question and three sub-question in accordance with the basic elements identified by Habermas (1974) as precondition criteria for the public sphere to exist: disregard of status, inclusivity and discuss matters of common concern,

The main research question is:

Are the Somali Paltalk forms an alternative public sphere and political platform?

And the sub-questions are:

1. *Who participates in the debates within the Paltalk forums*
2. *How their ideas are judged in the discussions?*
3. *How does the Somali online community (SOC) use the Platalk forums?*
4. *What kind of issues do the Somalis mostly debate in the Paltalk forums?*

1.2 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is outlined into six main chapters, each of which consisting of several sections and the conclusion of the study. Chapter one is the introduction of the study and it consists of presentation of the study direction, the objective study and research questions. This chapter also presents the outline of the thesis. Chapter two discusses the methodological approach of the study. It introduces the research design (qualitative case study) and methods for data collection and its analysis. Chapter three presents a review of public sphere theory. This chapter focuses mainly on Habermas' theory of the public sphere and also discusses some of the criticism of his ideas of the bourgeoisie public sphere. It also gives accounts of the ongoing debate of the public sphere and its application to other the non-democratic countries.

Chapter four discusses the internet and the public sphere. It describes the Social media sites (SMS) and further explains them as an online public sphere.   Chapter five discusses the idea public sphere in the Somali context and explores three important cultural arenas in Somali traditions: madal, ardaa and makhaayad. The chapter also discusses the Somali poetry and its role in the Somali public sphere as mean communication and publicity. Moreover, it presents an idea of the Somali public sphere (commonly known by the Somalis as fadhi ku dirir) and its transformation over history. The chapter six discusses about influences of the media on fadhi ku dirir.

Before the conclusion, chapter six presents the result of the study and then goes on to present a discussion of the findings. It attempts to explore answers for three sub-question of research in accordance with the Habermas' criteria for the public sphere to exist. Lastly, the conclusion provides brief answers to the main research question and then draws the general conclusions of the study.

2 Chapter two: Research Methodology

This chapter accounts for the selection of approach, research design and those methods that this thesis adopts and applies. The objective of this chapter is to identify a recipe or set of guidelines which are used in the unfolding and the presentation of the thesis. In short, this methodological chapter will clarify:

- The research approach that is applied in the study
- Design of the research
- Case of the study
- Selection of Respondents in the study
- Type of data used in the study
- How and through what kind methods the data is obtained

2.1 Qualitative approach

As discussed in the introduction (chapter 1), the main objective of this thesis is to explore whether Paltalk forums used by the SOC might be regarded as an alternative public sphere and political platforms. Consequently, this study attempts to observe whether these forums are open and accessible to all; what kind topics people engage in their discussion; and, nevertheless, how do they participate in the discussions and whether these discussions are inclusive. To find out the best and appropriate methodology that outfits for the purpose of this study, number previous research studies, conducted almost in the same area -online community (See for example, Bakardjieva 2005; Conroy et al. 2012; Feezell et al. 2009; Nie & Erbring 2000; Stanley & Weare 2004; Velasquez 2012) were explored and reviewed. Most of these studies employed quantitative methodology, so they used empirical designs through surveys and observational study. However, because of some limitation associated with these methods, quantitative approach was not suitable for purpose of this study. Quantitative researches use a numerical data that are analyzed by using mathematical methods to explain the studied phenomena (Aliaga & Gunderson 2003). This means that quantitative researches involve the use of numbers rather than words to assess information (Bryman 2012). In this case, use of quantitative approach would have proven to be difficult and far less appropriate, because the materials used in the study consist of an audio data (i.e. words and other verbal contents). In addition, albeit quantitative data collection methods (surveys) are well respected

techniques to collect representative data on factual questions from a large sample, their application in this study makes difficult to capture how abstract and complex is the issues in focus. Because, whenever addressing people's behavior, their interactions, experiences, and also their participation in events and discussions, an in-depth and holistic exploration of the issues is very essential. Consequently, to better explore the issue in focus, qualitative approach seems to support sufficiently the direction of this. Creswell (1998:15) defines the qualitative research as "an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The idea of conducting qualitative research is based on the principles that the social world is so inherently complex that each phenomenon requires its own explanation (Gomm & Hammersley 2001). Moreover, qualitative research methods are designed to help researchers understand people and the social and cultural contexts within which they live (Myers 1997). It moves step by step from the underlying assumptions and idea to research design, and data collection (Myers 1997). Therefore, it is useful when the objective of the researcher is to move from the idea of phenomenon to reveal and identify themes which might explain why and how that specific phenomenon operates in a particular context. As for this research, the attempt is to unfold why and how the SOC uses the Paltalk forums and find out whether it operates alternative public sphere and platforms for political debates. Therefore, "employing the qualitative method allows the researcher to:

- obtain primary data in a flexible and non-structured ways which allow the emergence of new information and interpretations of issue in focus;

- interact with the research subjects of this study

- in their own language and, in most of the cases, at the area they live in;

- attain a more realistic understanding of the SOC and its use of Paltalk forums, which cannot be gained in a numerical data and statistical analysis used in quantitative research.

2.2 Research design

Research design is an iterative and complex process which usually goes through multiple steps, providing a framework for the study. Research design primarily deals with purposes, strategies and methods to identify visible plans which gradually facilitate the successful completion of the research study; therefore it involves a series of important decisions about

the kind of research which will be applied in the research. Consequently, the research design which is applied in this study is that of the case study design. A case study is a research design which involves a detailed and intensive analysis of a single or few cases where the complexity of the nature of the case is sincerely studied (Bryman & Bell 2007). Yin (2003) contends that, in the social sciences, case study methods are the most prevalent research techniques to be used when the intent of the study is to observe a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context. Thus, the main benefit of implementing a case study lies in the particular details and holistic understanding researchers might gain from a specific phenomenon in its real context (Yin 2003).

The intent of this research is to observe the use of the Platalk forums by SOC. Therefore, case study proves to be an appropriate design for the research. It allows researchers to fully understand how and why do the SOC use the Paltalk forums. In addition, case study approach, as Simons (2009) suggest is "an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a "real life" context" (Simons 2009:21). For this reason, it lets the researcher to explore the perspectives of individual members of the SOC who uses the Paltalk forum. To add more, case study approach helps the researcher to obtain more insights, thorough contextual analysis, which might reveal interesting information, when he has "little or no control over studied events; and when the focus of study is a contemporary (as opposed to entirely historical) phenomenon" (Yin 2014:2). To sum up, the case study design proved to be the appropriate option for the research. It enables the researcher to unfold more insights and perspectives of Paltalk forums from the SOC. It also allows the researcher to find out whether the Somali forums on the Paltalk might be an alternative public sphere and political platforms.

2.3 The Case study

The case study of the research is the SOC who uses the Platalk forums. Somalis are among the earliest online communities who regularly use the Paltalk forums as communication and spaces for discussion. Surprisingly, Somalis are, despite the upsurge of warfare in Somalia, among all African nations, the people that mostly use the Paltalk Services. Consequently, the Somali Paltalk forums host the largest SOC. On an average mid-day, as discussed later in section (6.1), the number of the online Somali Paltalk forums, which are open and respectively active, reaches or exceeds over 68 forums. In some of these forums, the number

of the populations who are online may, on some occasions (e.g. weekends and holidays), reach the maximum capacity they could hold at one time and continuously remain congested for an over long time, perhaps 10 to 15 hours. On these forums, people conduct debates on the current political matters as well as social issues of their country; however, they may be inconsistency in their arguments and may not discuss specific themes or issues. Rather, any person who takes over microphone will leave the topic under discussion and bring on new themes.

Although, changeability of debates and inconsistency in arguments are evident in the Somali Paltalk forums, there are sometimes when users agree and moderators of the forums promote discussion about specific topics and especially on political issues. For instance, when new events, such as political struggles between top leaders of the country and battles between two warring functions or clan militias occurs, the users of the these forum conduct heated debates on these specific events. Groups, who are oppositely supportive to politically opposed leaders and the disputed fighting factions or clan militia, conduct intense debates on the matters.

Since, moderators who control some of the Somali Paltalk forums promote specifically political debates; their forums have recently attracted many Somali political leaders. Consequently, these have become the target of various leaders warring factions. Without a doubt, use of the Paltalk has become hugely important for leaders who want to mobilize and recruit support for his faction. Thus, the contribution of Paltalk forums to social and political mobilization of the Somali has been obvious in recent years. In fact the social and political mobilization of the Paltalk has been frequent, and some of the political factions within Somalia have begun to use the Paltalk mobilization, especially to accumulate funds or disseminate their propaganda and political agenda. "This includes the warlords, sharia courts, individuals within the TFG leadership, regional States and the Shebab, the latter hosting question-and answer sessions on Paltalk, as well as the opportunity to send questions to the former"

Despite the fact that Platalk forums have proven to be attractive discursive online spaces for many Somalis, including, faction leaders, civil society activists, highly ranked individuals from the government, religious scholars, other elites and mostly civilians, the academic studies on the Somali Paltalk forums are (if any) very limited. Therefore, it appeared to researcher, that conducting this research is both useful and interesting start for future researches on SOC in general and in specific those use Paltalk forums. The case of the study

is the SOC who uses the Paltalk forums. The major reason that led to conduct this study, specifically on the SOC and its Paltalk forums, is the rapid growth Somali Paltalk users. The idea of conducting this case study was born in 2011, when I was writing my bachelor degree thesis where my topic was *The Somali speaking Televisions and construction of the imagined community.*

2.4 Research sites

Research sites are where the "appropriate people (the target group) are likely to be available" (Berg & Lune 2012:47), therefore the selection of the research site is one of the critical steps of the research process. As previously motioned several times, the objective of the research is to explore whether the Somali Paltalk forums might be regarded as an alternative public sphere and political platforms. Thus, one of the essential questions is how to reasonably select the research sites that will enable me to observe the online interaction of SOC who use the Paltalk forums, and in that way collect a good data for the study.

According to Berg (2009:47) "in many cases the decision to use particular sites is tied closely to obtaining appropriate of the potential subjects. Poor site selection and poor and poor sample selection may weaken or ruin the eventual findings." To avoid such problems and select suitable sites, initial observations (but not in-depth ones) on the Somali Paltalk forum have been done several times before the genuine data collections has been started. The aim of this initial observation has been, as Berg (2009) suggest, to determine the suitable sites from which the researcher can obtain respondents from the appropriate populations and then collect reliable data for analysis of the study subject. In accordance with this view, the research selects as its sites two of the Somali Paltalk forums:

a- *Qolka Qaranimada Umada iyo Midnimada Somaliyed (QQUMS)*
b- *And Qolka Guusha Dowlada Live wareeysi Gobalada Dalka (QGDWGD)*

These two forums are among the most populated Paltalk forums used by the SOC (See Table 1). They are open throughout the entire 24 hours of the day. The number of populations who use them exceeds most of the time over 240. They even reach at times the maximum capacity that one forum can host. Because of this popularity and also the other reasons detailed below, the two selected forums; QQUMS and QGDWGD, proved to be study sites where appropriate

respondents for the study can be obtained; hence they are chosen to be the study sites of the research. Other grounds which led to the selection of the QQUMS and QGDWGD as study sites are: First, they are open spaces where all individuals, whose socio-economic status allows, and who have the knowledge and skills of the Paltalk use, can access them without restrictions. Second, the individuals who visit these forums get equal opportunity to participate in the discussions as long as they behave well, avoid offensive languages, and nevertheless respect other people's opinions. Third, both QQUMS and QGDWGD forums are originally established as platforms for political discussions where opinions about the on-going politics of Somali are exchanged and publicly debated. The fourth and most important reason that led to selection of QQUMS and QGDWGD is the Paltalk's ability to simultaneously provide audio, video and text chatting service. In addition, the oral tradition of the Somali people is also another important factor which led to the selection of the QQUMS and QGDWGD. Through the centuries, oratory has been a central feature in social relations of the Somali. It has been the prime means of communication and publicity. Thus, Paltalk forums are, as they provide audio and video communication services, online space where many people can freely engage in oral discussions on various public matters which might have impacts on the social, political and economic life of their country. Therefore, since QQUMS and QGDWGD are part of the Paltalk forums providing such opportunities, they are chosen as study sites of the research.

2.5 Methods of the Data collection

According to Grønhaug et al. (1995) research data research can be either primary or secondary. Bryman and Bell (2007) note that the primary data is firsthand information which researchers gather on their own by using preferred data collection methods. The secondary data is on the other hand referred to the data that is collected by other researchers or institutions and obtained from existing literature, documents, and articles. In this thesis both primary and secondary data have been collected.

The secondary data has been critically reviewed and collected from books, scientific articles and reliable internet sources, in order to attain better insights of the Somali Paltalk forums and if they might be: (a) an alternative public sphere, and (b) political platforms. The primary data has been primarily obtained by employing a combination of two qualitative methods: direct observations and in-depth interviews (Bryman 2012). These two methods are primarily employed in most research where qualitative case study is adopted as the methodological

approach of the study and the data that is used in the study, is of qualitative character (Yin 1994). Therefore, as this research adopts qualitative case study, it becomes very essential to use qualitative data collection methods. Accordingly, direct observation and in-depth interview appeared to be suitable methods for data collection of the thesis and there are methodological reasons behind the selection of these methods.

To begin with the direct observation, its selection is based two major reasons: First, direct observations are applied in this thesis, because it usually takes place over an extended period of time and aims at providing a richer understanding of the subject studied. Moreover, the intent of conducting direct observation is to gain intimate familiarity with an event, institution or given group of people through intense scrutiny in their natural setting (Holmes 2013). Accordingly, it helps the researcher to get a kind of close familiarity with the members of the larger SOC–namely those Paltalk users–so as to obtain rich and deeper understandings of the issue in focus. Second, direct observation can be overt (or obtrusive) where the members of the observed groups are informed that they are being observed; or it can be covert (or unobtrusive) where the observed people are unaware that they are observed (Holmes 2013; Trochim 2006). However, the extent to which people might need to be informed they are observed depends upon the situation as well as the objective study. As for this research the targeted group of the study is the Somali community who was severely divided into opposing clans for over decades. Therefore, informing them that they are observed can eventually create some questions about researcher's clan identity; why the observations are conducted and how the information obtained through the direct observation would be used. Moreover, the researcher is one the Somali journalists who previously worked for Universal TV, one of the first and largest the Somali TV in Diaspora. Therefore, if the researcher exposes himself and asks the subjects for their full and informed consent, this would possibility lead them to think that their thoughts and the information they shared in their discussions would be used in media; as a result they would probably behave differently and cause some methodologically biasness of the observations. Therefore, in order to avoid the problems of biasness that this may cause to the research data, covert observation appeared an appropriate approach. In addition, covert observations are selected because of its ability to allow observers to avoid becoming a participant in the context, stay passive, so as not to bias the observations and record what is going on as accurately as possible (Trochim 2006).

As for the In-depth interviews, its selection is based on the following reasons. First, the objective of this research is to find out whether the Platalk forums might be an alternative public sphere and political platform for the SOC. It intends to understand the overall activities of the Somalis who use the Platalk as spaces for discussion; therefore, it is very vital to understand the topics and themes which they mostly debate, their access to Paltalk forums, their experiences from the discussion and challenges they face in the Patalk forums. Such information may be easily missed in a survey. Therefore, an in-depth interview will enable the researcher to attain as much information as possible, because it will allow me to have an open conversation with the respondents and give them the opportunity talk while I will patiently listen to them.

The second reason that led me to the selection of the in-depth interview is related with the traditional characteristics of the Somali people. The Somali people are traditionally orally society (Cassanelli 1982) who tends to appreciate oral communication above all other art forms. Thus, facility with speech is highly valued among Somali society (Putman & Noor 1993). It is easier for the Somalis to openly talk with any person and share whatever information they might know about anything with the person whom they happen to engage in discussion, even if that person is a stranger to them. In addition to this, Somalis are, by nature curious people, who like knowing about everything. So, whenever they engage in conversation with someone, they perhaps may ask many questions, including personal details, and on the vice verse, they openly reply in detail, if they asked to, any questions about their personal lives as well other individuals they may know. Because of this unique reason, an in-depth interview is an excellent method for data collection of data for the study. It will apparently assist the researcher to obtain more insights and useful information to address the objective of research, because it stresses respondents 's freedom to talk and answer, by using their own words, the interview questions they want to answer, in the way they want (Diehl et al. 2011). In-depth interview will also facilitate researcher, as Keats (2000) notes, a more controlled situation where he can rephrase the research questions and help the reluctant or anxious respondents by giving encouragement to address their perspectives. This will happen with the use of probing questions.

The third and the last reason behind the selection of the in-depth interview as the data collection method of the research is that it will allow the researcher to adapt the questions to suit the informants' backgrounds, social situation, and languages; it will help the researcher

to build up a valuable trust and empathy with the respondents in the research (Keats 2000). As mentioned previously, the people of Somali have been, since the complete collapse of state in 1991, fragmented into opposing groups with different ideology, clannish, religious or political ideology. This breakup has disintegrated the society and created distrust among them. As a result, there are always some suspicious questions that might pop up whenever a Somali researcher attempts to conduct as research on his own Somali people. Therefore, in order to build up valuable trust and empathy and renounce the obstacles this suspicion might cause, an in-depth interview proves to be the right methods for data collection of the research.

2.6   Selection of Respondents

In the selection of respondents of the study, it is relevant to consider the specific context in which the Somali online community (SOC) who uses the Paltalk finds itself. The SOC is a part of the wider online community who use the Paltalk to communicate and conduct different types of discussions. Therefore, as the Paltallk forums are online spaces, providing service that enable members of SOC to communicate via video, internet chat and voice; it is very important that the selected respondents represent the active members of the SOC who utilizes the Paltalk forums as platforms for public discussions. As a result, the respondents of the study are members of SOC who actively use the two Somali Paltalk forums that are chosen as the study sites for the research. One of the vital requirements for the selection of the study respondents is that they are active users of the Somali Paltalk forums. Therefore they are members of SOC who actively uses of the Paltalk forums.

The researcher of the study has first contacted with 6 individuals from the two selected forums (3 from each forum), and asked them if they were willing to participate in the research. Among these included moderators[1], that controls the two forums under study. Fortunately, they have accepted to be a part of research respondents. Not only that, but they also facilitated for the researcher to contact with other individuals (referrals) who actively use the forums they moderate. Interestingly, they identified 30 individuals who have been active users the Paltalk forums for over five or more years. After these individuals were identified,

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[1] Moderator is a person who controls and moderates a Paltalk (chat room) forum. Moderators are distinguished by having an @ sign precede their nickname. Forum moderators help to control their forums. They have various controls that allow them to control features and speaking order in the room. They can use the 'red dot' to control that will get the microphone to speak, send video, or send messages in text. Moderators are able to take away the microphone (if it is a voice room) any person and bounce (remove) him/her in the event that they are extremely disruptive or abusive.

the researcher has contacted with and invited them to the participation in the study. Even though, they positively accepted the invitation, regrettably, all of the identified had not the capacity to participate in in-depth interviews for different reasons. Some could not participate because of time constraints and others because of the long distance of their host countries[2]. In this regard, only 17 persons who live in three countries (e.i.UK, Norway and Ethiopia) participated in the interviews. These three countries are the countries that the researcher could easily travel to. For instance, Norway the country of researcher's residence, UK is very close country to Norway, while Ethiopia is the cheapest place to collect data in terms of travel and accommodation expenses. To avoid becoming obtrusive during the observation, the selection of the respondents was not done until all parts of the covert observations were completed.

2.7   Data Collection

Direct Observation: As already discussed in this chapter (see section 2.5) two data collection methods (i.e. direct observation and in-depth interview) were employed. Therefore, consistent with the basic requirement of these methods, the data collection has been done in two phases. In the first phase, the data has been obtained through direct observation which was covertly done on QQUMS and QGDWGD. However, to collect this data, the researcher required to get access to Paltalk, so he needed to create his personal account, nickname and password. In addition, the researcher also required to download a desktop messaging program called PalTalkScene[3] from the Paltalk website (www.paltalk.com). Consequently, the researcher created his personal account with "UmarUMB" as the user's name (see figure 1)

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[2]These individuals have lived in different countries, such as Australia, England, Norway, USA, Canada, Sweden, South Africa, Egypt, Kenya and Ethiopia.

[3] PalTalkScene is a full-featured messaging/chat program that includes video, audio, and a host of other bells and whistles, as well as the ability to send and receive messages from several other chat programs or protocols, including Facebook and Yahoo IM
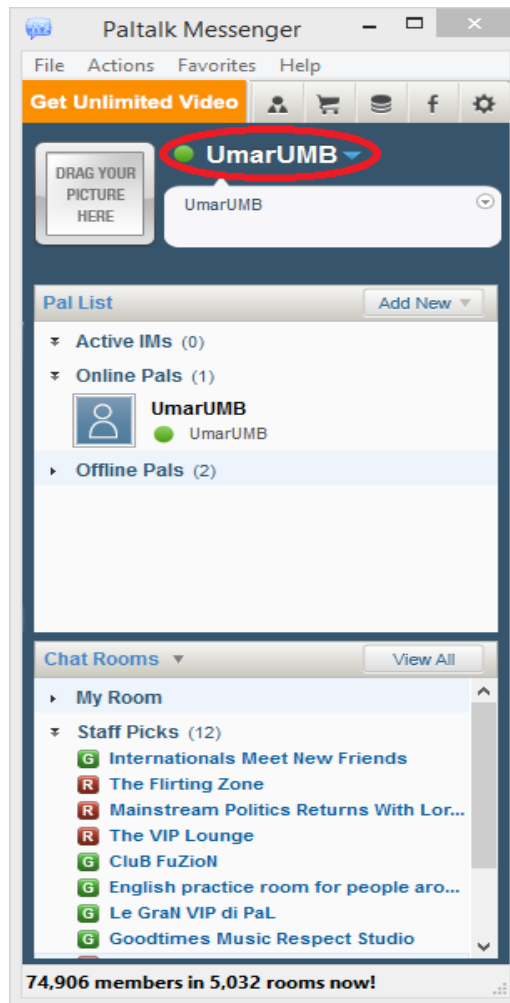
Figure 1: PaltalkScene (Messenger) source www.paltalk.com

After that, the research has started the initial observation and briefly visited all of the active Paltalk forums which are moderated by members of SOC. After this initial observation was completed and the sites for the study were selected, the second step of the research was apparently to perform the data collection. Therefore, the direct observations of the study sites (QQUMS and QGDWGD) were started.

The direct observations of the study sites were divided into three different parts which took place in three different periods in the year 2013. Each part of these observations lasted two weeks. The first part of direct observation was done from January 2, to January 22, 2013. The second part was done in the period between the April 3, and April 23, whereas the third part was conducted from December 6 to December 28, 2013. During the performance of the three parts of the observations, the time of the observation was divided between two study sites. For instant, each site was visited and observed twice in each period which means that each one was observer 6 weeks in different periods of the year. The reason that the observation was

done in these different periods was to explore the themes that are mostly addressed in these forums, and if they were changing with time and current politics of the country.

Another methodological factor which was very critical during the direct observation was the selection of the time (hours) of the day that the observation will be conducted. Since 1991 when Somalia entered into civil, at least one million Somalis fled from the country. A large number of the Somali refugees had settled and live in Europe, Australia, Asia, America, as well as number African countries, such as South Africa, Kenya, Egypt and Ethiopia. Therefore, the Somalis who use the Paltalk forums are globally scattered and live in the different continents of the world; therefore, it was methodologically very critical to allocate the suitable time (hours) of day when all most of the users of these forums might possibly be online. Accordingly, the research found that time between 1300 GMT and 2100 GMT was the suitable for the direct observations. These hours of the day are the suitable for all users wherever they lived, in USA, Europe, Asia or Africa. Interestingly, at these hours, the number of the online users sometimes reached 250 which is the maximum capacity of the forums. During different periods of direct observations, all of the debates that took place were tape-recorded and all posts on public window were read on their own accord first, to understand them in their context. In addition, the rules and regulation that govern the debates and how they are employed by the moderators were also observed carefully. As mentioned previously, this observation is covert and none of the users of the forums were informed that their discussions were observed. Therefore, in a sense, the direct observation of the two forums, QQUMS and QGDWGD, may be labeled as "covert". As both of the observed forums are considered to be an open public domain, the researcher finds ethically unproblematic to covertly observe them.

In-depth interviews: In the second phase data collection, an in-depth interview technique is employed and conducted with 17 respondents (10 males and 7 females) who live in three different countries, namely, Norway, UK and Ethiopia. The first interviews were conducted in Oslo with 4 respondents in the period between February 2, and April 22, 2014; and the second interviews with 5 respondents took place in London from April 20, 2014 until May 25, 2014, whereas, the other 8 interviews were done between June 30, and august 2, 2014 in Ethiopia, specifically in the cities of Addis Ababa (3 respondents), Diridawa (3 respondents) and Jigjiga (with 2 respondents). Each session of these interviews lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes and most of these interviews were conducted in private places, such homes and

other quiet places, where respondents were in their natural surroundings. Only three interviews were conducted in public places, such as cafeterias, internet coffee and shopping malls, because they were either were the respondent worked or places which are close to their work place.

In every interview session, the researcher first gave the respondents a brief introduction about the interview and also explained to them the purpose of the study to make them at ease. At that point, researcher made sure if the respondents were comfortable with audio-taping. The reason that the audio-taping technique was selected is: First, the Somali people are traditionally oral society; where spoken language the main means of communication. Second, the Somali people are fond of talking or conversation; therefore speaks openly and continually whenever they are engaged in talking. For instance, if any Somali is asked a question, it is easy for him/her to answer that question in details, and may add further extra information which may sometimes be relevant to the topic of discussion. Therefore, use of the audio-tape recording allowed me to grasp all of the necessary information that might be useful for the research motive. In the interviews, the respondents got more opportunity to talk, share and then discuss about their opinions about the chats on Paltalk forums, however, they were also allowed, if anyone was willing, to discuss and share their thoughts about other Social media as well. In that essence, these in−depth interviews were aimed to attain a deeper insight about the political and societal deliberations of the Somalis on Paltalk forums, and furthermore, how much inclusive are these deliberations and who predominantly participate in the discussions. It was also aimed to deeply investigate themes discussed in the debate.

During the in-depth interviews, researcher has encountered some minor problems. For example, some of the interviews were relatively very loose, and respondents sometimes did address precisely questions asked. Instead, they covered broader areas and brought into discussions other issues that were not related to research. Even, some of the respondents showed great interest in talking about various topics related immigrations and human smuggling; because they assumed that their interview would be aired on radio or televisions. Therefore, in order to keep the survey on the right foot-steps, the researched used, as suggested by Guion et al. (2012) probing questions wherever necessary.

2.8 Data analysis

This section provides the analytical methods and procedures used to analyze the collected date, based upon the research questions presented in the introduction (see Chapter 1). As discussed in the preceding section, the data for this research was collected by using two different methods, i.e. direct observation and in-depth interview. Therefore, the nature of the data obtained by using these methods was quite different and obviously very huge. Thus, the simplest way in which this data could be analyzed was to employ two different of the two approaches. Consequently, thematic analysis and narrative analysis were employed. The former was used to analysis the data obtain through the direct observations, while the latter was utilized to the analysis of the in-depth interviews. The data was in the form of audio and also in Somali language; so that it was necessarily important to translate it into English language and same time to transcribe it. After the transcription of the whole data was completed, first the data which obtained through the in-depth interview was read and re-read several times and subsequently coded and analyzed by using narrative analysis. As Wester et al. (2004) recommends categories were developed that are relevant for replying the first, second and third sub- research questions of the study:

- *Who participates in the debates within the Paltalk forums and*
- *How their ideas are judged in the discussions?*
- *Why does the Somali online community (SOC) use the Platalk forums?*

The aims of these sub- questions were to observe whether the Paltalk forums used by the SOC might alternative public sphere. Thus, in order to address this aim, Habermas (1974) two of Habermas' precondition criteria exits has been utilized. Consequently, *"disregard of status and inclusivity"* were designated as the main categories for coding of the in-depth interviews. Therefore, as Wester et al. (2004) recommend in their guidelines the data was inductively categorized and then key patterns were coded and referred to identified categories, *disregard of status and inclusivity,* so as to obtain answers to the above mentioned research question and filter out the issues that are unrelated to the subject of the research..

After the analysis of the data which was obtained through the in-depth interview was completed, the analysis of data that was obtained through the direct observation was carried on. Likewise, the in-depth interview's data, the data of direct observation was in the form of

audio. Therefore, by using thematic analysis, it was, as Boyatzis (1998) suggests, transcribed and subsequently read and re-read several times with special attention to understand the themes and issues discussed in the debates in the two observed Paltalk forums, QQUMS and QGDWGD. When the transcription of the data was done, the second step of the data analysis was to identify the fourth sub-question of the research: *what kind of issues do the Somalis mostly debate in the Paltalk forum?*

Consequently, open coding of the data was inductively conducted in order to discover the themes that are mostly debated in the discussion and then establish the patterns that might be matters of common concern. Through the process of the open coding, several issues –namely, federalism in Somalia, regional states, the political struggle between state leaders, reconciliation and stability –were found to be the most debated issues during the three periods of direct observation of the two forums, QQUMS and QGDWGD. Since these three themes were the most debated themes, they were labeled as main categories of the data; hence the data was divided among them so as to identify the patterns which were relevant to purpose of the study and filter out the irrelevant ones. At the end, the whole results that were found were holistically integrated together for discussions

3 Chapter three: Literature Review

3.1 The Public Sphere

The idea of the public sphere has its original roots in the historical process of the emergence and development of publics in the western democracy (Koçan 2008). It goes back to Aristotle who, in his book "the Politics", described the public sphere as "public life constituted in spatial-temporal setting of market place (agora) where citizens as equals gather to discuss (lexis) matters of common concern in polis" (Koçan 2008). However, most the current conceptualizations of the public sphere are often associated with the ideas expressed in Jürgen Habermas' book *"The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society"* [4]. In this book, Habermas undertakes an extensive analysis of the history of structural transformation of the public sphere in the Western society. By relating to each other the political, social, cultural and philosophical developments in a multi-disciplinary way, Habermas (1989) traces the rise of the bourgeois public sphere and its subsequent fall. He idealizes the 18th century European bourgeois public sphere as an inclusive and universal sphere where all citizens were able to participate in open discussions.

Before the bourgeois public sphere came, the Europe culture was dominated by representative systems in which the monarchical and feudal societies organized themselves around symbolic representation and status (Habermas 1989). In this system, the memorial king or lord displayed himself as "an embodiment of some higher power" (Habermas 1989:7). Therefore, the king or lord was the only public person and his authority of was stated before the people and not for the people. In this manner, the public and private realms were not separated (Ibid).

However, with rise of 18th century public sphere, the representative cultural of the feudal societies was eventually replaced by a new liberal constitutional order, where the bourgeoisies, unlike the feudal societies, "presupposed strict separation of the public from the private realm in such a way that the public sphere, made up of private people gathered

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[4] Jürgen Habermas is a German sociologist and philosopher in the tradition of critical theory and pragmatism. Perhaps he is best known for his theories on the public sphere. *The structural transformation of the public sphere"* was his first major work of the public sphere. This book was first published in German early 1960s, and has been translated later into English in 1989

together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state, was itself considered part of the private realm" (Habermas 1989:176). For Habermas, the ideal situation of the public sphere "is one where public life – what he calls the 'system world', the world of external, bureaucratized machine life – would have no impact on our private lives – the life world. [This] life world is the space of organic humanity" (Garnham 1992:374), where individuals develop their identities, personalities, and opinions without state and economic intervention (ibid).

Habermas notes that members of the bourgeois public sphere had often convened at coffeehouses, dining tables and salons in Europe (especially in Britain, Germany and France) to engage in rational critical debates about social and cultural matters of common concern (Habermas 1989). The debates within the bourgeois public sphere, which physically took place in face to face meetings, "served as a counterweight to the absolute will of monarchs" (Ibid) where most of the issues that were debated wide array of subjects, mostly those related to the politics, economics and literature. Participation in the debates was supposedly to be open and accessible to all who wanted to have a voice in the discussions (Habermas 1989). The desired objectives of these debates were to form a public opinion and thereafter reach consensus or collective agreement on the issues that were equally debated among all respondents (Habermas 1989). So, according to Habermas (1989), the bourgeois public spheres, which concurred with the development of capitalism in western Europe, did consider personal status as a criterion for participating in the critical debates. Consequently, it "preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from pre-supposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether. [This] tendency replaced the celebration of rank with a tact befitting equals" (Habermas 1989). Furthermore, Habermas (1989) asserts that the bourgeois public sphere was inclusive, in principle, and accessible to all citizens as close to universal as possible. Discussion between its member involved issues of common concern (Habermas 1989). Thus, in Habermas' viewpoints of disregard of status, inclusivity and domain of common concern are the institutional criteria for the public sphere to exist. The success of a genuine public sphere can be possible when these criteria are cultivated and uphold by the society (Habermas 1989), because they ensure equal opportunities for all citizens join the rational-critical and become members of the public sphere (Habermas 1989).

In further analysis of bourgeois public sphere, Habaermas discusses universality across society, where all citizens had the right to join the rational-critical debates and had their

voices heard (Habermas 1989). He therefore argues that the bourgeois liberal institutions needed in the initial stages to spread the universality of knowledge and access to all. According to him the only one way, by which these institutions could possibly do this, was the creation of literacy spheres of the early media press (Habermas 1989). Therefore, Habermas puts particular emphasis on the impacts of the media press; the critical journals and moral weeklies of late 17th and 18th century, on the public sphere (Habermas 1989). According to Habermas (1989) at that time the media press begun to establish itself as an independent function of the society and soon become a benevolent form of free expression which was oppositional to the states controlled forms of communication (Habermas 1989). In this the media press functioned as a literary sphere that was detached from the state and independently played a significant role in the promotion of public debates on issues related to the political and judicial matters of the state (Habermas 1989). They provided the means (i.e. the newspapers and pamphlet) through which thoughts of the private citizens could become public (Habermas 1989). In fact, through media press information and ideas of the privates were circulated (Habermas 1989; 1990). Libraries and universities became places for public debates; whereas the media press companies provided the means by which the state elites were criticized. In this way, media press had initially presented new spheres for the political and societal debates that were protected from the power of the state and the church as well (Habermas 1989).

The advantages provided by this new public sphere include people's access to the objects of the public critical attention −i.e. the works of arts, philosophy and literature −which previously "remained a preserve in which church and state authorities had the monopoly of interpretation" (Habermas 1989:36). These products were not anymore "components of the Church's and court's publicity of representation"(Habermas 1989:36). They became available to many people who had −by the use of rational communication −determined meaning to them, verbalized and stated the implicitness for so long they could assert their authority. In addition to this, Habermas (1989) notes that the public sphere which started to evolve across Europe in the 18th century was initially a separate domain from the ruling authorities, where private citizens had the advantages to freely exchange news and conduct debates about matters of common concern, that were accompanied by growing rates of literacy, accessibility to literature, and a new kind of critical journalism (Habermas 1989).

Although, these were the characteristics that defined emergence the public sphere of the 18th century Europe at its initial, it was however damaged by the evolution of the monopoly capitalist. Formation of large private institution, such as public relations and advertising companies, had swiftly transformed the media press from means of information dissemination to medium of advertising. Deals between these institutions led the media press to be commercialized and eventually became a manipulative agency for the bourgeoisie (Habermas 1989). They produced a discourse dominated by objectives of advertising which turned the "rational–critical debate" into "cultural consumption", and then made most of the society a passive publics who were concerned more about consumption rather than the political actions of their countries (Habermas 1989). In this respect, Habermas (1989) argues that media press as its owners collaborated with economic authority, became a part of a quasi-feudal: a kind of public life where politics becomes a managed show of elites excluding most of society from debates and decision-making in the "refeudalization of the public sphere"(Habermas 1989:195). To explain this Habermas coins the term ""refeudalization" of society" (Habermas 1989:231) which he describes as "a retreat of an earlier form of public life in which its only function was to act as an arena for the display of power" (Sparks 1998:111), where economic feudalism and corporate propaganda control the public opinions and indirectly colonized the public sphere via mass media (Habermas 1989). Under these circumstances, the "critical activity of the public discourse" was replaced by an atmosphere that is conductive to passive cultural consumption and political laziness. In this context Habermas contends the public sphere was degraded into "an arena for advertising than a setting for rational-critical debates" (Calhoun 1992) where "public's rational-critical debate … became a victim of this "refeudalization." (Habermas 1989:158). With this argument, Habermas accounts the vital role that the mass media played in the decline of the bourgeois public sphere and its replacement by "pseudo-public or sham- private world of culture consumption" (Habermas 1989:160).

Since Habermas' influential work, *"The structural transformation of the public sphere"* appeared, his idea of the bourgeois public sphere has been extensively discussed in various academic literatures. He was criticized for idealizing the bourgeois public sphere; a utopian ideal which neglects the differences among its respondents, and exaggerating its potential for consensual deliberations. According to Eva M. Knodt (1995), who writes the forward in

Luhman's book the *"Social systems[5]"*, "Luhmann has criticized Habermas' consensus-oriented discourse ethics as a hopelessly inadequate response to the complex issues that arise in highly differentiated postindustrial societies (Luhmann 1995:xiv). Along similar lines, Mccarthy (1992) writes that people's interpretations of their interests and needs stand in the way of reaching their consensus. "Even if we outfit our good-willed respondents with the intelligence and sensitivity to understand and appreciate the needs, interests, and points of view of others, we are still far from rationality motivated consensus. For one thing, respondents' interpretation of their needs cannot simply be taken at the face" (Mccarthy 1995:472).

As discussed previously in this section, Habermas claims that the bourgeois public sphere was initially inclusive. The discussions which took place in it were open and accessible to any person who had access to books, journals and other cultural (Habermas 1989). In addition, the bourgeois public sphere was an autonomous realm outside the state control and most of the discussions framed in it were motivated by a rational-purposive action (Crossley & Roberts 2004). However, despite the Habermas' claim in this regard, various academic scholars have criticized the bourgeois public sphere. They argue that it was not really accessible to all, but it was limited to specifically to the members of the rich propertied bourgeois men who had access to literary sources (See Benhabib 1992; Calhoun 1992; Crossley & Roberts 2004; Fraser 1990; Goode 2005; and Susen 2011).

Susen (2011) argues that Habermas' idea of the bourgeois public sphere attempts to romanticize an idea which reduces the complexity of the modern public sphere into a singular bourgeois public sphere. A public sphere that was not really accessible to all, but limited to member of elite –mainly rich and educated men who had access to the literary sources. In this context, Goode (2005) notes that "illiteracy and poverty excluded much of the rural and the property-less urban populations, and the literature that was energizing the bourgeoisie specifically *addressed* the bourgeoisie in both form and content"(Goode 2005). In the same line, Calhoun (1992) argues that "the early bourgeois public spheres were composed of a narrow segments of the European population, mainly educated, propertied men, and they conducted a discourse not only exclusive of others, but prejudicial to the interests of those excluded" (Calhoun 1992:3). Calhoun explains further that it was not Habermas' intent to

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[5] This book was originally written in German in 1984 and translated into English 1995 by John Bednarz, Jr with Dirk Baecker

suggest that the bourgeois public sphere was simply created by the socio-economic class of its members. "Rather, it was society that was bourgeois, and bourgeois, and bourgeois society produced a certain form of public sphere (Calhoun 1992:7)

Observing issues of equality and accessibility in the public sphere from different angles of perspectives, Schudson (2008) proposes the idea that the conversations in the public sphere are not necessarily egalitarian, but essentially public. He argues that equality is not necessarily important to characterize the conversation in any public sphere. Consequently, he is opposed to norms of equality among the members of a public sphere, since, according to him, it undermines the richness of the deliberations in public sphere. Schudson (2008) points out that "the actual relationship of talk and equality is not one of affinity but of paradox. The more that talk is among true equals, the more it fails to make assumptions clear, fails to state premises, fails to be accessible to all, lapses even into silence" (Schudson 2008:95-96). As a result, he contends, the presumptions of equality in conversation draw attention away from the fundamental problem of membership in democracy ... and so precludes attention to roles that make democracy possibly for a pluralistic rather than a homogeneous populations" (Schudson 2008:96). Thus, in order to avoid such a failure, he suggests *publicness* rather than equal participation in talk. "Democratic talk is not necessarily egalitarian, but it is essentially *public,* and if this means that democratic talk is talk among the people with different values and different backgrounds, it is also profoundly uncomfortable"(Schudson 2008:96).

Focusing on women's exclusion, Nancy Fraser (1990) discusses gender inequality in the bourgeois public sphere discussions and notes that it was not just the lower socio-economic classes that were excluded from the bourgeois public sphere, but also women. Women's talk has been either interrupted or neglected in public deliberation (Fraser 1990). According to Fraser (1990) experience has been documented in previous feminist research which reveled men's tendency to interrupt women and speak more than them in public deliberations, while "women's interventions are more often ignored or not responded to than men's" (Fraser 1990:64) In this way, deliberations in Habermas' bourgeois public sphere served "as a mask for domination [by men] *(ibid)*. Extending Fraser's criticisms, Crossley and Roberts (2004) states that Habermas' "neglect of public sphere rather than the male bourgeois public sphere [which] for example equating the 'male' with 'public' establishes all sorts of a false and misleading dichotomies" (Crossley & Roberts 2004:12).

Fraser (1990) believes that the bourgeois public sphere idealized by Habermas failed to incorporate other "competing public sphere" within the society as it was an exclusive space reserved for educated propertied bourgeoisie male who excoriated other alternative public sphere and "deliberately sought to block broader participation" (Fraser 1990:61). For this reason, she argues that the bourgeois public sphere was " the arena, the training ground, and eventually the power base of a stratum of bourgeois men, who were coming to see themselves as a "universal class" and preparing to assert their fitness to govern" (Fraser 1990:60). Other subordinated groups of the society -e.g. women, workers, and peoples of color — were marginalized and excluded from the public discourse in the bourgeois public sphere (Fraser 1990).

Fraser (1990) posed, in the course of her argument, a critical question about Habermas' singular homogeneous public sphere: "Under conditions of cultural diversity in the absence of structural inequality, would a single, comprehensive public sphere be preferable to multiple publics?" (Fraser 1990:68). In answer this question, Fraser (1990) writes:

> "[The] public life in egalitarian, multi-cultural societies cannot consist exclusively in a single, comprehensive public sphere. That would be tantamount to filtering diverse rhetorical and stylistic norms through a single, overarching lens. Moreover, since there can be no such lens that is genuinely culturally neutral, it would effectively privilege the expressive norms of one cultural group over others, thereby making discursive assimilation a condition for participation in public debate. The result would be the demise of multi-culturalism (and the likely demise of social equality). In general, then, we can conclude that the idea of an egalitarian, multi-cultural society only makes sense if we suppose a plurality of public arenas in which groups with diverse values and rhetoric's participate. By definition, such a society must contain a multiplicity of publics."(Fraser 1990:69).

Therefore, calling the public sphere as "a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk, she argues for the necessary of having various public spheres which accommodate the interests, needs and identities of the different "members of "subordinated social groups" such as women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians (Fraser 1990). Accordingly, she proposes to call these various spheres "*subaltern counterpublic*" and thus argues that they would enrich the rational debates by expanding the discursive environment. For Fraser the *"subaltern counterpublic"* is a "parallel

discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser 1990:67).

Benhabib (1992) echoes Frasers' concern and similarly criticizes the exclusionary manner of the bourgeois public sphere. She argues that various issues (issues of "reproduction, nurture and care for the young, the sick, and the elderly) which normally affect women's lives were separated into the private realm of "nongeneralizable interests" outside purviews of the popular discourses. In this manner, she contends, the bourgeois public sphere promoted a discourse domination which legitimized the marginalization of various life-world issues. Therefore, proposing counter publics, she argues for the feminists to counter the popular public discourse in their own spheres (Benhabib 1992). In a similar vein, Squires (2002) details several types of counter-publics. He, by focusing on African-Americans, describes different types of the public that are organized around the issue of identity (race or ethnicity). Michael Warner (2002) also explores the public sphere as a counterpublic to include gays, transgender, and transsexual community. He therefore subsequently debunks completely the inherent exclusiveness nature of the" public" (See Warner 2002).

In other viewpoints of the public sphere, Nicholas Garnham (1992) holds the idea of one singular overarching public sphere, but he notes there may be other subsidiary public spheres, each of which is "organized around its own political structure, media systems, and sets of norms and interests"(Garnham 1992:371). Similar to Garnham (1992), Peter Dahlgren (2001) discusses about publics where people are organized around various issues. So he describes the Publics as "issue publics". John Keane (1995) also writes about overlapping and interconnected public spheres, varying in nature and size that force the Publics to revise their understanding of public life as well as public opinion and public good. Therefore, he distinguishes several public spheres that: the micro-public sphere" which operates at the sub-nation-state level; the meso-public spheres which operates at the nation-state level; and the 'macro-public spheres' that have a global, supra-national character (Keane 1995).

In other lines of public sphere discussions, Gerhard Hauser (1998) proposes a different direction for it by foregrounding its rhetorical nature. He therefore argues that Publics are formed around the ongoing dialogue rather than the identities of the individuals and group who are engaged in the discussions (Hauser 1998). Publics are groups of interested

individuals who engage in "vernaculars discourse" about a specific issue. They form a rhetorical public sphere that is based on discourse, not necessarily orderly discourse, but on any interactions whereby these interested publics engage each other in discussion. For Hauser (1999) this rhetorical public sphere has several primary features: First it is discourse-based, rather than class-based. Second, the critical norms are derived from actual discursive practices. Third, the arguments presented in the discourses are judged by how well they resonate with the population that is discussing the issue. Third, the public sphere is composed of many intermediate dialogs that merge later on in the discussion (Hauser 1999). Therefore, he contends that, even though "Publics may be repressed, distorted, or responsible, ... any evaluation of their actual state requires that we inspect the rhetorical environment as well as the rhetorical act out of which they evolved, for these are the conditions that constitute their individual character" (Hauser 1999:80-81).

Accounting for the public sphere ideas of the above mentioned theorist, it can be argued that Habermas' notion of a single conventional and unified public sphere is likely to vanish in favor of a more segmented, pluralist model of the public sphere: Something like a "complex mosaic of differently sized overlapping and interconnected public spheres"(Keane 1995). What binds the people in this contemporary overlapping public sphere is "diversified and shifting complex of overlapping similarities and differences, particularly in the growing number of the multicultural societies"(Dijk 2012:190).

In further debates, Habermas' arguments on the mass media in relation with the public sphere have been critically discussed in academia. According to Khamis and El-Nawawy (2009) various scholars have criticized Habermas for what they described as his "print-media bias" which is expressed in his "argument that the new broadcast media's immediacy might discourage the distanced reflection and critical discussion among their audience" (Khamis & El-Nawawy 2009:30). Habermas (1989) writes in his argument of new mass media that:

> "With the arrival of the new media the form of communication as such has changed ... Under the pressure of the "Don't talk back!" the conduct of the public assumes a different form. In comparison with printed communications the programs sent by the new media curtail the reactions of their recipients in a peculiar way. They draw the eyes and ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance, place it under "tutelage," which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree"(Habermas 1989:70-71)

Here, Habermas warns against the immediacy of the online media, but he though fails to account for the fact that the new media have been, in comparison to the old printed media, more accessible to more people (Gerhards & Schäfer 2010). In this context, Thompson (1990) argues that "the development of the mass communication has created new opportunities for the production and diffusion of images and massages"(Thompson 1990:115). He indicates that the new situations of the modern media provide the communicators with unprecedented opportunities for reaching and influencing huge number of individuals (Ibid).

John Hartley (1992) also makes a bold argument that the modern new media is the public sphere: "Television, popular newspapers, magazines and photography, the popular media of the modern period, are the public domain, the place where and the means by which the public is created and has its being" (Hartley 1992:1). In the contemporary world, he contends, it is in the popular media where the public sphere resides. They have created their own version of the public sphere in the form of "popular readerships," media audiences for which they produce meaning as a replacement for the bourgeois discourse communities of the 18th century (Hartley 1992:1). In this way, the new media enhances a creative interaction among individual audiences even though they may not share a special-temporal setting (Thompson 1990).

Alongside the above discussed criticisms of Habermas' public sphere, there are other important critical aspects of his idea. Habermas focuses his discussions of the public sphere on the western democratic societies and calls the public sphere as "realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas 1974), where all citizens have the right to equally and exclusively debate matters. According to him "a portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body (Habermas 1989) In ideal terms, the public sphere is, for Habermas, a source of public opinion which is needed to "legitimate authority in any functioning democracy" (Rutherford 2000:18). Therefore, as discussed previously in this chapter, Habermas describes three criteria –i.e. disregard of status, inclusivity and domain of common concern –which are the principle values preconditioning genuine public sphere to exist (Habermas 1989). However, these values are not exclusively inimitable to one particular society. Rather, they can be further taken to the stand that they are universals, but that societies might differ in how these values are defined, weighted and practiced (Khamis & El-Nawawy 2009).

Across the world there are several societies in the nondemocratic countries who enjoy at least some of these values (if not all), or yearn to attain, even though they are deprived these values (Khamis & El-Nawawy 2009). Despite the fact that many societies enjoy a public sphere that is similar to western public sphere, most of public sphere studies seem to totally neglect the existence of other public sphere and limit their focus on the western democratic society. However, I argue that the notion of the public sphere cannot be limited to the western world. But it can be applied to any society who culturally enjoys the values that defines the public sphere. In Somalia, there is a tradition which is based on dialog and cultural deliberation participated by all adult men. In this regard, the next chapter explores the public sphere within the Somali cultural context.

4 Chapter Four: Internet and Public Sphere

4.1 Social Media Networking Sites (SMS)

Over the last two half decades the world has witnessed an overwhelming contemporary development in mass communication and media technology. This technological development—especially instant online communications —has made the internet an innovative ways in which many people can easily communicate and stay connected with each other (Sponcil & Gitimu 2013). The internet has rapidly facilitated the appearance of new communications realms and online platforms where many people, who share the same interests, activities or real-life connections, meet together to build social networks among themselves. In this way, it has resourcefully created new opportunities for Web-fueled social movement to change the discursive landscape by creating online networks of collective communicative actions where ideas and information are exchanged and at the same time various types of discussion are freely conducted (Boyd & Ellison 2007). According to Benkler (2006) these networks allow many people to change their relationship to the public sphere.

> "They begin to free the public agenda setting from dependence on the judgments of managers, whose job it is to assure that the maximum number of readers, viewers, and listeners are sold in the market for eyeballs. The agenda thus can be rooted in the life and experience of individual respondents in society—in their observations, experiences, and obsessions" (Benkler 2006:272).

In this regard, the internet and its online networks have established new spaces for communication and public discussion where all kinds of issues, including political, economic, and social issues, are publicly discussed by individuals who meet on the internet networks. Castells (2009) defines this network as " a new communication realm, and ultimately a new medium, whose backbone is made of computer networks, whose language is digital, and whose sender are globally distributed and globally interactive"(Castells 2009).

These online networks include the social media network (SMS). They are a category of websites that is based on user participation and user-generated content. They provide their users with ground-breaking ways to interact by employing a variety of web technologies to create highly interactive forums on which individuals can create, share, discuss and modify

their content (Kietzmann et al. 2011). This makes the SMS new realms of communications and ultimately new mediums of information (Castells 2009:70) through which transfer of ideas becomes increasingly fluid among millions users who are interactively and globally scattered. Today there are hundreds of millions of people who integrated the SMS into their daily activities to sustain their relationships with the people whom they might possibly share similar values, interests and concerns (Gulia & Barry 1999). As a result of this, they have increased popularity among many people and become an important type of interaction medium that are embedded within the internet and have casually developed various communication ways (Chan-Olmsted et al. 2013).

The widespread usage and popularity of the SMS have recently attracted the attention of many scholars from different fields who attempted to contribute to defining the SMS and its characteristics. Kaplan and Michael (2010) characterize the SMS as a group of web-based applications which allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Michael 2010:61). Similarly, Boyd and Ellison (2007) define the SMS as a web-based services that allow their users to build a public or semi-public within a system of shared relationships. Dykeman (2008) adds further that "[SMS] are means for any person to: publish digital creative content*; provide and obtain real-time feedback via online discussions, commentary and evaluations; and incorporate changes or corrections to the original content (Dykeman 2008:1) In the words of Safko and Brake (2009) SMS are also described as a networks for activities, practices, and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions via "conversational media". In their view, the conversational media are the Web-based technologies that allow their users to create and easily transmit contents in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios. In this respect, SMS are online forums for interactions, collaboration, and creation of various types of digital contents which are then shared among mass of people (Eisenberg 2008). They are networks which extend communicative actions among many users, because they provide with people commutation features which allow them to stay connected and communicate with each other (Mayfield 2008). Therefore, SMSs are essential 'communicative structures' (Keck & Sikkink 1998) where durable relationships and exchanges of ideas, based on trust, legitimacy and ethical behaviour, can be established (Podolny & Page 1998).

Because of the communication platforms and services they provide, SMSs have unique characteristics which underline their operation. These characteristics are: participation,

openness, conversation, community, and connectedness (Mayfield 2008). According to Mayfield (2008) each of these aspects has its significance to encourage more people to participate in the online discussion and easily share among themselves huge amount information contents in matters of few minutes. Not only that, but they lead the public to discuss matters of common interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment. As a result, the increase of SMS usages might eventually extend the future role of the public in the political and social arena (Papacharissi 2002)

4.2   Social media and public sphere

As stated in section (4.1) the public sphere is a network for communicating information and points of view' about common goods (Habermas 1996). It is a network that is based on free flow of information, free expression and free discussions. In the public sphere private citizens are able to produce and circulate information contents and opinions that can in principle be critical to their governments (Fraser 1992). The public sphere is, in this regard, a discursive network, which is stirred by exchange of meanings, ideas and point of views towards a deliberative process of decision making. For such public sphere to effectively function, Habermas (1989) argues that all respondents must be treated as equals and status must be disregarded, so it would not play any role in the debates; discussions must involve matters of common concern; and all members must be inclusive and have the opportunity to assemble freely and express their thoughts. The idea presented in the discussion must be considered on the basis of their merit, and not on the social status of the speaker *(ibid).* In this context, everyone would come to the public sphere as equals so that only validity of the argument could influence the discussion (MiKeon 2004). Habermas's definition of the public sphere and his criteria (i.e. disregard of status, common concern and inclusivity) for public sphere to exist can be recalled to explain the SMS as a new revitalizing public sphere for the following reasons which are detailed below.

The public sphere is, according to Habermas (1989), an arena with social life which is formed around free inclusive discussions. Consequently, it is difficult to imagine a public sphere without discussion. This is the first reason where the parallel between the public sphere and SMS can be drawn. SMSs are a category of websites that is based on user's participation and user-generated content. These sites, which are online communications channels dedicated to

community-based input, and interactions, employ different technologies and networks to create highly interactive platforms through which individuals can create, share, discuss and modify content (Kietzmann et al. 2011).

Thus, the main activities on the SMSs are the discussions between the individual who meet on them to participate inclusively in debates about issues of common concern. Anyone who has the required skills to access and use SMS can participate in these debates. This gives an opportunity to many people, who have been previously marginalized from the mainstream, to participate in the discussion and express their opinions more freely and inclusively. Again, this is where the parallel between the public sphere and SMS can be drawn.

In addition, there is a similarity that the two concepts, SMS and public sphere, share in common as to what they mean and represent. Both concepts consist of two words which represent the society and the means or the spaces in which they use to communicate and interact. For example, the public sphere in Habermas's theory, represents the idea of individuals who participate in discussions within particular spheres or spaces (Poor 2005). In the same way, the SM represents individuals and the media they use to communicate and interact. The individuals who meet in the public sphere or on SMSs are not acting only as private citizens, but they are playing a public role by conducting mutual debates about matter common concerns to form public opinions which might potentially affect the public policy as and politics of their government. Taking this idea into account, the SMSs might be regarded to be new public sphere. The "social" in the SMSs might represent the "public" whereas; "media" might refer to the "sphere". The terms; Social and Media, are combined concept to represent, like the public sphere does, individual and space.

To further the idea that SMSs are new public sphere, this study recalls Habermas' definition of the public sphere. As stated already in the previous section (see section 4.1) Habermas (1996) defines the public sphere as "a network for communicating information and points of view [about common good]"(Habermas 1996). The SMSs include websites, like Facebook, Twitter, and Paltalk, which connect together millions of people and enable them to create and exchange huge amount information content (Kaplan & Michael 2010). The SMSs are therefore effective communications networks through which people can find the valuable information they need when they need it to make informed decisions. Consequently, they

might be defined with the public sphere which Habermas (1996) calls a "network for communicating information"

5 Chapter Five: Public sphere in the Somalia context

The concept of the public sphere is most often associated with Jurgen Habermas, author of "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" (Habermas 1989). His work takes the position that the public sphere in its simplest and ideal form is a realm in social life where opinions, particularly focusing on the needs of society are freely and openly discussed by people to identify societal problems that might have an effect on their public lives. For Habermas, a genuine public sphere, as discussed elsewhere in this thesis (see section 4.1), can only exist when it satisfies the pre-conditional values that describe it to exist –i.e. Disregard of status, Domain of common concern, Inclusivity (Habermas 1989). These values, which are praised by most of the public sphere theorist, are not distinctive only to western democratic society. Indeed, there are many non-democratic societies who have culturally enjoyed these values for over centuries. For instance, these values are imbedded in the traditional pastoral culture of the Society. Lewis (1961) points out that the Somali people have culturally practiced since long time "pastoral democracy" that's based on a deliberative meeting where every adult male have had equal opportunity to openly and freely participate in the major discussions (Ibid).

However, the participation within this democracy was not fully accessible to all Somalis. As a result of this, there are in the Somali tradition three interlinked, but structurally and operatively different arenas each of which has its significance in the Somali culture. These arenas are: *Madal, Ardaa* and *Makhaayad.*

5.1 The Madal – traditional assembly arena (Shir dhaqameed)

The *Madal* is a very vital place in the Somali culture – usually in the cool shade of a large tree in central of a nomadic hamlet –where meeting of any significance typically took place (Lewis 1961). It is a traditional arena, which served as the main venue for two of the most important institutions of the Somali pastoral nomadic society: i.e. "*shir"* and *"wada-xaajood"*.

Figure 2: Madal

The *shir,* is a public discussion that is rooted in the deliberative "pastoral democracy*"* of the Somalis (Lewis 1961). It is an open realm where all adult men in the same hamlet meet to discuss matters of common concern. Vital information about war and peace, pasture and fresh water and also livestock were exchanged and examined in the *shir*. Moreover, *madal* also provided the setting for ceremonial occasions, such as marriage, Islamic ritual festival as well "*caleemosaar",* "or aleemasaar" ceremony*,* where distinguished guests were accommodated and entertained (Lewis 1994).

Wada-xaajood is the most important congregation in the Somali culture. It is a meeting where judicial experts, called "*Xeer-beegti"* and the traditional elders called "*Guurti"*, assemble to discuss matters of customary law and resolutions of conflicts are formalized through dialogue (Abdile 2012). The *wada-xaajood congregation* is an informal meeting that is summoned when needs for it arises. An example, if two clans or lineage groups are embroiled in conflict, the *'Guurti* (the traditional elders)" of the conflicting groups convene *wada-xaajood* congregations to negotiate the contending issues at stake (Abdile 2012).

Before coming to the *madal* to participate in the discussion at *wada-xaajood* congregation, as the Somali proverb says, "*Gartaada inta aadan geedka tagin ayaa la naqsadaa*, (loosely translated into English as *You should first determine your claim by yourself before you take it to tree for trial*)", each of the conflicting group arranges their own small meeting determine

claim on the contending issue at stake and chose delegates that would represent them in discussion at *madal :* the central meeting place (Lewis 1961). However, despite the fact that each group selects its reprehensive, all those concerned, even if they number several thousands, attend the congregation. They sit in lose circle in the cool shade of a big tree (Lewis 1961). Elders from other neighboring clans are also invited to give an impetus to the discussion and the decisions that may at end emerge. During *wada-xaajood* discussion, *xeer-beegti,* who are mainly composed of *Sheikhs* and members of the *Guurti,* always explore *'xeer'* to find out the codes that can curb the contentious issues addressed in order to avoid the recurrence of conflicts. While doing this, attendees are given the opportunities to speak and present ideas, voice their opinions and also ask the necessary questions (Lewis 1961).

If codes that can curb the contentious issue are not found in the *xeer,* that issue becomes '*Ugub'* – A new phenomenon. Therefore, to find a solution, *xeer-beegtis* resort to the Islamic Sharia law for reference. If they obtained references from the Sharia law, they then integrate them into the customary codes to make a part of the 'Xeer'. But, if the debated issues have precedence in the 'xeer', they are called '*Currad'* – old phenomenon, and "then the problem was generally resolved easily (Millman 2013). Moreover, *wada-xaajood* discussions in the *Madal* congregations are where Somalis discuss issues of crimes and punishment, family conflicts such as marriage and divorce, heritage and so forth (Lewis 1961). In these discussions, they also decide to set proportions that the victimized individuals or clans would get as compensation in case of injury, homicide, animal looting or clan provocation. If someone is guilty of homicide, the case was brought before the *Guddi*; a group of law experts called *Heerbeegti*, who will then pass on a verdict (Lewis 1961). In this respect, *Madal* was not a meeting arena, but also a law court, administrative body as the domain of public authority.

Despite the fact that, *Madal* congregations were open and accessible to all adult men, the discussions in the *shir* and *wada-xaajood* meetings were not inclusive. According to Lewis (1961) at every segment of the Somali society, all adult men were classed elders (*odyaal* sing. *odey*) who have had the right to speak and present their opinion at these congregations that deliberated matters of common concern. However, the *sab* bondsmen, such as *Midgan, Tumal and Yibir*, and women were the only adult men who were traditionally marginalized and excluded from the direct participation in the discussion of the political and social affairs of the noble Somali lineage men they attached to (Lewis 1961)

In the madal congregation, every linage group who was participating in the debates or deliberations was led by a clan leader[6] who headed a delegation of his clan which consisted of a group of well respected elderly men. These elderly men were either esteemed because of their wisdom or by their wealth –especially how many camel herds on has. They are traditionally considered to be *Wax-garrad*[7] *(or* knowledgeable individuals), hence they are the ones who make most of vital important decisions of the *Arrimaha Reerkooda* (their clan affairs); for instance they decide whether to go to war or to enter peace treaties. During the deliberation in the *Madal* which is where such critical decisions were made, it was only those elderly men among the delegations who could participate in the discussions. Others who happened to be at the meeting scene were spectators. However, in some case, especially when there is a need for more information to make clearer, the case under discussions informed individuals, who could have some adequate information, were invited to talk and present opinions or what they know about the discussed matters. In this manner, the Somali traditional *shirs* (or meetings) in the *madal*, strikingly bears, in one way or another some resemblance to those of ancient Greece assemblies of "ecclesia (ekklesia)"(Grote 1869).

In the ancient Greece city states of Athena, assembly (Ekklesia) based as far as possible on active involvement of citizens were held several times in the year at a place called Pnyx to discuss issues which matters their common concerns. However, although the basic principle of the Ekklesia was the active involvement of all citizens, yet slaves, women, and those under 18 of age could go to Pnyx and participate in the discussion (Rhodes 2004).

When it comes to the Somali traditional assembly in the *madal,* it was held in the shadow of a big tree usually, in middle of the nomadic hamlets and nearby place (Lewis 1961). The Somali traditional assembly was based, likewise the Greece Ekklesia, on active involvement of all adult men in clans. However, as discussed previously in this section, it was only members of *wax-garad* delegations, who could talk and address their opinions in the discussion. Members of the caste groups and women were not able to participate in the discussions with in the *madal*.

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[6] Depending on the geographical area, the Somali clan leaders, who mostly *inherited* the *leadership of their clans* from their fathers or older brother, are differently named. Suldan, Ugaas, Weeber, Garaad, malaaq, and Boqor are some of names given to Somali clan leaders.

[7] Wax garrad – means (a wise man) or person considered to have good experience and deep knowledge

5.2 The Ardaa – Family domain

Traditionally, there has been in every society two spheres recognized: private and public. The private sphere is where issues related to family are discussed by members of the same household. In Somalia, even though the concept of private sphere has rarely been used in the literature discussing the structure of the Somali society, public arenas (clannish arena) of the Somali people has been indirectly or indirectly explained in the academic literature about Somalia. In these literatures, which written by both foreign[8] and indigenous scholars[9], the Somali people are characterized as a pastoral nomadic society that are traditionally divided into various segmentary lineage groups, organized into a hierarchical system of patrilineal descents, and whose kinship is traced to an apical ancestor (Lewis 1994). Because of this hierarchal system the Somali people are categorized into different clans *"Qolooying* sing. *Qolo"* sub-clans*"Jilbo* sing. *jilbo"*, sub-sub-clan (*Reero* sing. *Reer*) and then into households *(Qoysas,* sing. *Qoys),* each of which group has its own public sphere. The *Qoys* is the basic unit of the Somali society, whereas *Reer* is a single extended and collective *"dia-paying"* group (Samatar 1989) of a number of households *(Qoysas)* where everyone is viewed as a member of the *Reer* and primarily owes allegiance. Therefore, every person who belongs to the lineage of the *Qoys,* or who is, in the case of the Bondsmen, attached to it is included in the *Qoys* and has the right to participate the *Reer* activities. For instance,

> "the grazing camel units, (the [*geel jire*[10] as they are called) are in the charge of the unmarried men and boys who, from the age of about seven, are sent out to learn the demanding skills of the Somali pastoral nomadism" (Lewis 2008:53-54).

Geel jire units are very busy during the day time to carry out several duties. These duties include tending, watering and milking. They drive the camel to suitable pasture and provide security. This hard work requires information, consultation and discussions of how to manage the daily task. Therefore, in the evening time when *geel jire* (the camel herders) are back at their bases and camels are herded into their camp, members of the same *geel jire* units are

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[8] (See Cassanelli 1982; Fox 2000; Hoehne & Luling 2010; Lewis 1961; 1994; 1998; 2008,; Fox 2000; Hoehne & Luling 2010; Lewis 1961; 1994; 1998; 2008; and Menkhaus 2007)

[9] (See Abdile 2012; Abdullahi 2001b; Ahmed 1996; Haji-Abdi 2013; Samatar 1982; and Samatar 1992)

[10] Geel Her , or geel Jir – camel herdsmen

together again in their *Ardaa*. They gathered around the fire place and talk about how they had spent the day while eagerly waiting for the camel milk to be served. Thus, it is here where they share information and the same time discusses issues concerning their daily activities and divide their tasks of the next day (Abokor 1987).

At the hamlet, women are responsible for the domestic affairs. They keep themselves engaged all the day in a variety of household activates, ranging from cattle tending, firewood collecting, and water fetching and cooking. On the *Geedi,* (or family expeditions) when *Qoys* is on the move, members of the family have different tasks and responsibilities. Women are responsible most the domestic issue. They manifold tasks include: to pitch of huts, load and drive the camels, look after ropes and, if necessary make them (Burton & Waterfield 1966). Girls have also their own duties. [They] stay with the domestic unit based on sheep and goats, helping their mothers care for the smaller stock and performing other domestic tasks such as grinding grain into flour, cooking and caring for younger siblings (Lewis 2008:53-54).

Men, especially elderly and married, hold the leadership positions of the *Qoys*. Their foremost assignment is to lead the family and make vital decisions about the *Qoys* affairs. They conduct exploration of appropriated pasturing areas and find out where to move camel herds during the dry seasons. Bondsmen in the *Qoys* are also expected to contribute to the activities of the *Qoys*. However, their activities is limited to do the leather and metal work (Laitin 1977). In this respect, every person in *Qoys* is a part of the family unit which has a very tight and collective solidarity based on mutual bonds towards the basic cultural duties.

Because of the cultural solidarity and social bond that ties them together; every Somali *Qoys* have established its own arena or private sphere, the "*Ardaa*", in which they have deliberated matter which concern their *Qoys*. Abdulahi, an old Somali man whom I met with at Taran coffee shop, one most popular meeting place of the Somali in Oslo, detailed that in the *Ardaa,* every individual in the *Qoys,* has the right to speak and address his opinion in the discussion. Even the subordinate bondsmen' groups of *midgo*[11]*, tumaal and yibiro*[12], who are traditionally bracketed from the discussions in the *madal* congregation, enjoy some sort of freedom in which they could speak and at least have their voices and an opinion to be heard and accounted in the decision-making of the *Qoys*. Women also have had freedom to address their opinion during family discussions at the *Ardaa*. They, in some cases, propose ideas that

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[11] Midgo is the plural form of midgaan, a part of the *sab* bondsmen in Somalia
[12] Yibro is also the plural form of Yibir a part of the *sab* bondsmen in Somalia

have significant effects on *Qoys*. In addition, women have their own separate arenas where they meet with other women from the same hamlets or nearby hamlets to discuss issues that are normally related to and affect their lives. Those are the issues which Benhabib (1992) describes as issues of "reproduction, nurture and care for the young, the sick, and the elderly" (Benhabib 1992:89-90)

5.3 Makhaayadda, (Teashop) – The public sphere

Tea (or Shaah in Somali language) is an important social beverage for the Somali people. It has a long history in Somali tradition. In Somalia the tea-drinking, when it does not happen in the comfort of one's house, primarily occurs teashops on street corners in the urban cities or in the shadow of the trees in the rural areas. Therefore, in every gathering place in Somalia, there are uncountable numbers of teashops where people could come and buy tea. The teashop is called in the Somali language, *Makhaayad (*pl. *Makhaayad* or *Makhaayadaha*).

In the rural areas of the country, the *makhaayadaha* are allocated around water wells (or Ceelka in Somali). The water wells in Somali were, like the *"Agora"* in the ancient Greece, central meeting grounds for various activities. They were scene for many actions taking place differently. Businesses were conducted there, debates and discussion were held, and nevertheless judicial proceedings have sometimes happened in *madal* arena located there.
In this regard, the water wells were always encircled many important spaces, such business[13] places and gathering arena. However, *Makhaayadaha (*or the Teashop) are the most outstanding public places in which people came together to discuss about business, politics, poetry, current events, and also other important issues or events that occurred sometime in their historical periods. For this reason, from the cultural standpoint of the Somalis, *Makhaayadaha* largely serve as centers of social interaction. In contrast with other two traditional arenas (the *madal* and *Ardaa*), they apparently provide the social members with spaces where freely congregate regardless of who they are, to talk, discuss, or entertain one another. Thus, the patrons came there not only to buy and drink a tea, but they came to engage in discussion of all kinds of topics, including, business, politics, current events, or issue relented with their environment. Moreover, the *Makhaayadaha* were in the Somali culture

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[13] Watering wells are traditionally very vital in the Somali culture. It is a both a business centre and public gathering arena. Around watering well there several important place such as *suuqa xoolaha* (animal markets), *dukaamo* (shops), *birtumalyaal* (forgers), *kabatole* (shoe-makers), *bacadle* (cloth merchants) and *Makhaayado* (teashops)

sources of information, where news from one locality to another, transmitted orally by travels who came to markets around the water wells to buy or sell commodities and animal were shared (Abdullahi 2001). For example, if a nomad would have come to the water wells with a livestock to sell, the first he would, before the animal markets, go to *Makhaayad* to get a cup of tea and learn the variation of the animal prices in the last days.

During his stay in *Makhaayad*, the new arrived nomad would get from other patrons who were there before him information he needs to know about the market. In return, he would share with them what he knows about where he was coming from. In this way, the *Makhaayad* functioned in the Somali tradition as area in social life which was made up of private individuals, from nearby localities and travelers from long distanced places, who met together in order to freely interact, exchange their ideas and information and nevertheless engage in discussions. On this account, the Somali traditional teashops (*Makhaayadaha*) around the water wells in rural area resembled in their original function, the 18th century coffee houses of Europe which Habermas (1989) described as a public sphere.

In the urban area, however the traditional ways in which Makhaayadaha were transformed by changes in social life of the Somalis within the urban cities and towns that started to grow in the country during the colonial era and the following post-independence period. The traditional issues that were usually discussed in the *Makhaayadaha* in rural area were not any more issues on the talk. New issues, such as job opportunities, politics as well as other topics related to the urban city lives emerged and gradually become issues of public matters. Despite these changes, the street culture of the Somalis basically remained as a tea culture. Many Makhaayaddo were established and found from the smallest village to major cities in every neighborhood up and down the country and people, mostly men, hang out in Makhaayadaha to drink tea, chat with friends or exchanging idea other patrons.

Even though, Somalis enjoyed in *makhaayadaha* a kind freedom to critically discuss and identify the societal and political problems of the country, they faced severe restrictions during the military rule of the country which lasted for over two decades, from 1969 to1990. The military rule of Somalia has completely prohibited any discussions that contain issues which could be critical to the regime. Therefore, it was not allowed for anyone to raise any question, whatsoever, which was criticizing the systems. These restrictions were lifted after, in 1991, after the military regime was toppled. Thus, over the course of the last two decades,

vast region has been characterized by civil wars, conflict between farming communities and militia groups led by warlords and religious faction struggling for the power, the Somali Makhaayado have undergone several changes which has then led to constant "structural transformation" (Habermas 1989) of Somali the public sphere.

In early 1990s, specifically in the first three years of that decade in which the intensity of the conflicts in the country has reached to its highest peaks, the Somali public sphere was nevertheless demoted into various fragmented and countering spheres, each of which consisted of member's one particular lineage group who have plainly discussed issues that matter most the best of their clan interests and to that of alliance clans. Generally, Somali society is based on clannish structures that are interrelated through complex networks of social relationships, which extend over clan territories marked with fluid borders. Thus, clan membership plays a central part in Somali culture and politics (Lewis 2008). It's where the solidarity and social cohesion of Somali society lies.

However, Mohamed (2011) argues that many of the on-going contentions in the country are centered around clan disputes as allegiance to the clan far outweighs allegiance to one united Somali nation. He argues that the current political conflicts clan-based civil war country revealed the negative consequences of the clan-politics and the manipulation of clan differences to achieve power. In addition, the instability of the country has highlighted the limits of clan-democracy and X*eer* as a framework for conflict resolution. It has, by escalating fragmentation among the society, devalued the basic principle of the Somali society (Ssereo 2003). Indeed the conflict of Somali which based on clan-politics and division has led the private and public life of the Somalis to be demoted into opposing groups who are organized on clan interests which sustained the clan conflicts of the country since early 1990s. Moreover, the fragmentation which was ensued by the armed conflict has created separate "clan spheres", where the main discussions were about clan-politics, rivalry militia and economic interests (Mohamed 2011)

At that time, every clan had its own deliberative arena where its members came together to discuss issues which matter their only clan interested (Mohamed 2011). Kapteijns (2013) notes that in earlier years of the conflicts, clan hate-narrative were freely and openly circulated in private or semipublic space among people who share the identities they reinforce and transform. This has eventually helped the political and military leaders, who would later

become warlords to colonize the public sphere, so they would form opinions supporting their political agenda and ambitions to control the country. Explaining this circumstance Kapteijns (2013) notes that much of the discourse which took place in the clan public spheres at that time were "hitched to the political projects of political and military leaders who believed that [conflicts and] clan cleansing could help them achieve their goals" (Kapteijns 2013:209). They have frequently used local media outlets to spread hate-narratives and mobilize their clansmen so as to coordinate killings and ensure that their plans for extermination of other clans were faithfully executed (Kapteijns 2013).

The warlords[14] in Somalia have used hatred and animosity language in order to break down the Somali society into fragmented, unfriendly and rivalry groups. This language has been spread by individuals who had very good ties with warlords and also clan leaders and other elders who had no option other than supporting their warlords. They have therefore regularly organized clan meetings which took place mostly in the houses owned either by strong and influential businessmen, clan leaders or warlords. Such meetings were always the focal point where formation ideas supporting the conflict always were initially shaped before they were released to public sphere. As soon as, any meeting of such kind is over, a person called " *afhayeenka beesha* (clan spokesman)" would talk to press to give a brief reports of what was discussed in the meeting, the decisions of the discussions, and what was required from the members of the clan in supporting their armed militia (Mohamed 2011).

Immediately, as such press was released, people had always started to debate about decisions made in such kind of discussion and the possible following steps which could be taken as a result of the clan decisions . Therefore, they would become, for the following days, topics of discussions in the *Makhaayado*. Any who paid visits to the *makhaayaddo* in those days, would have found people who were sitting in groups and hotly debating about decisions made by clans as well as fights between clan militia. At times, these groups would have consisted of individuals from different clans who had conducted heated debates in which every person who participated in the discussions had always justified the position of clans in the conflicts (Mohamed 2011). And this is why the Somalis give discussions in the Makhaayad, the name "*Fadhi ku Dirir*", which has negative connotations and literally means in English*: "fighting*

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[14] Despite the fact that the use concept (warlord) in the Somali context is contested in that the Somali militia leaders are considers heroes by their clans, however, in this study, any person who have had a control over any area due to the presence of armed forces who are loyal him is a warlord.

while sitting". Further, discussion of the *"Fadhi ku dirir"* as a Somali public sphere will be addressed later in section (5.5).

5.4 Somali poetry: Means of public sphere communication and publicity

Habermas' discusses the importance publicity, and communications in the public sphere. He contends that the public sphere requires "specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it"(Habermas 1974:49). Therefore, he points out that in contemporary societies, the newspapers, magazines, radio and television are the main tools for publicity; hence he argued argues that they are the means for communication in the public sphere (Ibid). In the Somali, poetry has been over centuries the chief means of the public sphere communication, substituting for history books, broadcasting and newspapers. It has been the main avenues in the Somali public sphere through which 'language and culture were transmitted orally and historical events, stories, customs, lineage and customary laws were passed on from generation to generation' (Adam 2005:51). K'naan, a well known Somali-Canadian poet and rapper who was interviewed by Craig Kielburge on the Shameless Idealists TV show, defines the Somali poetry as a form of communication which is primarily used by the Somali people to spread a lot about their history and culture. He said: "If you could imagine the text book and newspapers combined, that is poetry in Somalia. It informs our everyday life and everything about history coded and collected in the memory banks of poetry" (Freethechildrenintl 2011). Ahmed (1996) also portrays the Somali poetry as an "important medium of artistic expression … through which people express[ed] their feeling, fears and happiness" (Ibid:9).

From these perspectives, the Somali poetic heritage is intimately connected with people's daily lives as it is a significant medium for debates within the traditional public sphere. Indeed, the Somali poetic occupies a wider and very vital position in the Somali culture. It is so rich and beautiful. In it there are talks of beauty, love, politics and religion. There are also mentions of morals, values and history (Hagi-Mohamed & Warfa 2010). Interest in the Somali poetry is universal. Every individual desires to have skills in it so as to participate in the debates within the public sphere. Thus, as a result of this, there were already many who possess the skills to compose verses of poems. Richard Burton, an English explorer who visited the country in the middle of the 19th century, was impressed by the Somalis passionate love of poetry. He famously described the Somalia as a 'nation of poets' and wrote:

"The country teems with 'poets'… Every man has his recognized position in literature as accurately defined as though he had been reviewed in a century of magazines – the fine ear of this people causing them to take the greatest pleasure in harmonious sounds and poetic expressions … Every chief in the country must have a panegyric to be sung by his clan, and the great patronize light literature by keeping a poet"(Burton 1856:115-116).

The Somali poetic heritage is a living force that is intimately connected with the vicissitudes of everyday life (Andrzejewski & Lewis 1964). It is the principal discursive means, by which the Somali people define their identity, record their history, express their deepest feelings and communicate their opinion. According to Afrax (2010) "Within Somalia's oral culture, poetry is especially powerful in influencing people's attitudes and Somali history provides ample examples of poets who used their art both to fan the flames of war and to bring peace" (Afrax 2010:73). Thus, it is main vehicle which drives communicative action within Somali the public sphere.

In the early twentieth century the oral poetry of the Somalis has served as an expression of anti-colonial resistance. It has been used by the Dervish movements to incite rebellion as well as to record the historical events of their battles against the colonial rulers of the British Empire, Italia, and Ethiopia as well. During that period of the time, the debates and discussions within the Somali public sphere were done through poetry. Apparently, Sayid Mohamed Abdile Hassan, the leader of the Darvish movement who was himself one of the most well-known poets in the Somali history (Samater 1982), used poetry to influence the public opinions. To rally his followers against his enemy recruit more forces, Sayid Mohamed had composed various poems to celebrate the victories his forces gained in their wars against the colonials [15] who came to occupy and spread infidel ideologies in the country. One of the most famous of poems composed by Siyad Mohamed is named *"Koofil"*. By this poem, he disseminated a massage about the death of Richard Corfield's death; a British colonial officer who was killed in the year 1913 by the Darvish forces at the battle of *Ruuga* which took place Dul Madoba hill (Somali: Buurta *dul Madooba*) near Burao town in the northwestern region of Somalia (Ciise 1976; Jardine 1923; Juang 2008).

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[15] For Sayid Mohamed and followers in the Darvish movement are portrayed by the Somalis as worries and heroes who fought against the colonial powers to liberate the country

Use of the Somali poetry as a medium of anti-colonial resistance expression has never ceased, but it remained effective in the Somali public sphere during the liberation and independence movements in the country and also afterward. Therefore, in the nationalist movements that led the country to its independence in 1960, poetry was the most vital medium of communication among freedom fighters that used it as the publicity means to disseminate information and mobilize the public opinion of the Somalis society across the country. In fact, the poetry was the main communication means of the Somali public sphere during the anti-colonial resistance. Outstanding Somali poets enthusiastically produced poems expressing powerful sentiments of national liberty and unity for all Somalis, which was then new themes in the Somali public sphere (Abokor 1987). The patriotic poems composed by these poets ignited in the public sphere discussions which condemned the colonial powers in the country. They also led to the creation of new autonomous liberationist public spheres where individuals could freely exchange their political views, discusses abuses by colonialists and other issues to inform the Somali public of forthcoming events and the possible reaction of the colonial army. Some of the most prominent events organized by the Somali publics during the liberation movements were the "*Dhagax Tuur (*stone throwing*)* battle and *Ha Noolaato* (long life) battle which took place in Mogadishu in late 1940s. The latter battle resulted from protests which followed a visit of the Four-Power Commission to Mogadishu to ascertain the aspiration of the Somali people to gain their independence as one united nation. At that time, the idea of pan-Somali had spread across the country. People were eager to see all of the territories[16] inhabited by Somali people to be united; hence the major discussion themes in the public sphere of that time were an independent Somalia, where all of five Somali region are unified together into one nation and one state; Somalia. Therefore, the arrival of the four-power commission was a golden occasion for the Somali political parties and other liberation movements to show their determination of independence and endorse the idea of a unified Somalia. Thus, they organized huge rallies and protests in support of their will. However, these protests turned into riots by which prominent figures such as Hawo Osman AKA *"Hawo Tako"* was martyred. During these protest poetry was the main communication medium by which rallies and other events were organized. Various poets who were members

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[16] During the colonial period Somali was divided into five parts: British Somaliland in the north, Italian Somalia in the south, the French Somali coast in Djibouti, Ogaden (Somali-Ethiopian region of present-day) in the west and the Northern Frontier District (NFD) (The Kenyan North Eastern Province of the present-day).

of the Somali Youth League (SYL)[17] composed patriotic-poems to gain the support of the Somali publics and engage them into the liberation movements of their country. As a result of this, the role of poetry in the Somali public sphere in the periods of independence movements has been significantly important. It was a vital vehicle by which Somalis exchanged their liberation views and discussed the grievances and suppressions of the colonial powers to form their nationalistic opinions. Poetry was in this regard the main publicity tool by which the criticism against the colonial powers could be circulated. It played similar roles to those of the 18th century media institutions, such as newspapers, journals, and independent press which free from state ownership and control. Poems and songs were recited in the Makkhaayad which were the vital points of congregations, where Somali individuals (specifically male) used to meet to engage in discussions and entertain each other. Thus, whenever a new patriotic-poem was composed by a poet, that poem was circulated easily first in the Makhaayad, and then spread into the wider public sphere.

The role of Somali poetry in Somali public as a means of publicity has always remained very useful, even in the post-independence period. It has been used as a medium of public mobilization in the shorter periods of the democratically elected Somali government, in the military regime era between 1969 and 1990, in the overthrow of that military regime, and also in the peace processes during the civil wars. According to Afrax (2010) the Somali poetry has been an important medium for peace and stability promotion in every process with the intention to bring peace into Somalia. According to him, most the prominent Somali poets and artists, inside and outside the Somalia, have supportively played important role in contributing to the peace process of the country (Afrax 2010). By denouncing the civil war and promoting stability, the Somali poets have devoted their arts to the pursuit of peace and justice in the country which suffers from the civil war that has devastated the very social fabric of its people (Afrax 2010.

The peace role that the Somali poets play during conflicts has its historical roots in the Somali culture. Many Somali poets have traditionally used their art to promote peace and avert eminent fights between clans. To mention, Salan Arabey (in Somali Salaan Carrabey) is one of the poet-peace makers who used their poetry to separate the forces of two related kin groups who were on the brink of war. After a long peace process led by religious leaders

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[17] The Somali Youth League (SYL) was the first political party in Somalia. It played a key role in the nation's road to independence during the 1950's and 1960's

failed to mediate the conflict, Salan asked religious leaders if he could speak to about to fight groups in a language they could understand. He then recited a poem entitled *Waar Tolow Colka jooja* – "Oh Clansmen, Stop the War". After this poem was recited, the forces were disengaged and the imminent fighting between the two groups was averted (Afrax 2010).

In addition to the vital role it played in averting imminent conflicts between Somali clans, the poetry has been the medium of critical debates. It has been an essential publication tool and a vehicle by which individuals living across distances conducted by the political and social debates. Sometime after the defeat of the Darvish in 1921, a poetic debated between dozen of Somali-well-known poets begun to circulate in the Somali public sphere. Cali Dhuux, a well-known Somali poet, composed an invective poem addressing a particular lineage, i.e. Ogaden, to retake the Dollo water wells which they lost to the Isaq lineage. As soon as that poem was spread and become a discursive issue in the public sphere, Qaman Bulhan, a poet from the addressed linage, replied to the poem. Then, several other prominent Somali poets also joined the debate later, consequently, a poetic chain know as "*Sisiladii Guba*" was ensued and went on over twenty years (Greene 2012). Other similar poetic chains named "*Deeley*" and "*Siinley*" also took place in 1970 and early 1980. Both of these chains contained political poems (Greene 2012).

Furthermore, in 1980s, some poetic works have appeared which were critical to Siyad Bareh and the way that his military administration ran the affairs of the country. The political oppositions who were against the Bareh's regime had often relied on oral poetry, either recorded on cassette tapes or broadcast through BBC radio to voice their dissent (Lewis 2002). "Opponents of the regime, in and outside Somalia, composed stinging attacks on its leaders – often in the form of opaque love song. These were countered in composition by the president's own 'court' poets and led to prolonged poetic exchange" (Lewis 2002:251). In short, the poetry has played a significant role in the rebellion against military regime and created new public sphere in which the military rule could be criticized. During that period, the poetry was the only means of publicity in the Somali public sphere by which people could express the grievances and the atrocities committed against civilians by forces of the military regime.

In the years that followed the fall of the military regime in 1991, waves of propaganda poems different than those recited during the rebellion against military rule appeared in the Somali

public sphere. As Samater (1982) explains that a Somali poet is expected, by using his poetry, to defend the rights, the honor and the prestige of his clan against the attacks of rival poets; to immortalize his fame and to act on the whole as a spokesman for the clan (Samater 1982). Consequently, in early 1990s when Somalia witnessed the one of most perplexing wars in modern history, some poets gave their support to particular fighting factions in the civil war and hereby exacerbating clan chauvinism. During the four months distressing fights that broke out 1992 between the supporters of Ali Mahdi's and Genaral Aidid, poets from the fighting clans recited opposing poetries to affirm their position in the clans and defend their reputation and status against the attacks of rival poets.

Throughout history of the country, poetry has been influential in Somali society. It has been the country's most vital medium of mass communication, substituting history books, newspapers, journals and broadcasting tools. In recent decades, after the Somali language has been written in 1972 for the first time (Hassig & Latif 2007), and as the cheap media apparatus, such as radios and tape recorders has begun to spread into urban centers as well as rural areas, it has been expected that the oral poetry of Somalia might decline as a societal force (Hultman 1993). In fact, the contemporary communications and transportation have spread the art more efficiently from one area to another. Distinguished poets have begun to travel from one place to another, leaving behind tapes of their work to be passed around and evaluated (Hultman 1993). Moreover, the internet has made easier for Somali poets to spread their work. There are already volumes of online websites and Palatlk forums assigned for dissemination of the Somali poetry.

5.5 Fadhi ku Dirir: the Somali public sphere

In 1991, Somalia has entered an era of instability and wars between opposing warlords and clan faction (Wam & Sardesai 2005). Since then time, the country has experienced the worst civil war in the recorded history and has continued to exist without a viable central government (Stanton 2012). Disorder and without government have flattened the state to the ground and disintegrated it into fragmented zones controlled by factions and militias who have relentlessly attacked one and another (Ricciuti 1993). The wars between these factions have "ruined the social bond, moral principles and trust among Somalis" (Uluso 2013).

Despite the fact that Somalis have, in the face of conflict, lost their social bonds and trust among them, there is still some aspect that connects them to each other, i.e. the hang outs and congregation in the coffee shops and other meeting places. Although, clan affiliation seems to be restrictive and plays significant roles in Somali culture, still Somalis do not hesitate to socialize and create hang out space in which they meet. In every city, they settle in there is a well-known place they gather.

As discussed in the preceding section (3.3), *Makhaayado,* (today's coffee shops) have been the focal spaces where Somalis have traditionally used to meet and engage in discussion. Prior to conflict teashops were indeed vital sources of news and meeting places of value: Patrons might come to them and drink tea, chat with your friends, and socialize with patrons whom they might meet. In urban areas like cities, teashops were where the youth and the unemployed typically gather in the morning to spend their time, exchange views and share commentary on football, events or movie they watched the night before. In the afternoon, teashops were overcrowded by members of the older generation used to meet there to discuss various issues before they turn on the radio to hear the news on the BBC Somali Service at 5.30 PM.

However, the nature of the Somali public sphere in the *Makhaayado* has been in constant transformations. Over the past three decades, especially after 1991, when the state of Somalia was collapsed, *Makhaayado* –now in the form of coffee shops –have become a space for public discussion which are often manipulated to the political ends of clans. If any person walks into a number of Somali coffee shops, in everywhere, in and outside the country, that person will find groups of men separately sitting around various tables and hurling rhetorical ordnance for hours at a time. Most of these rhetorical ordinances are about clan politics or disputes between political elites of the country. You will also find that these men are, in any occasion, all speaking and shouting at each other, like they are listening to each other. In this respect, these men "are Somalia's coffee shop warriors" (McGill 2006).

According to McGill (2006) *fadhi ku dirirs* have been since 1991 the essential discursive activities of the Somali streets and coffee shops in the country and in the Somali diaspora that that spread across globe. In the early days of the conflict, *Makhaayado* begun to gradually become spaces in which issues related to the conflicts and the clannish ideologies of the combating militias have been angrily and emotionally discussed by loyalist each of who

supports his clan militia (Ali 2012). At times the discussion between the supporters of the opposing warlords, clan militias and leaders of religious faction who are fighting in the country went more politically futile, but passionate clannish word attack and counter-attack fuelled with accusations (mutual caustic blames and insults) on each other or on each other's clan for causing the crisis of the nation. Indeed, clans were praised and others were disparaged and insults and name-calling were normal in the fadhi ku diri. Even today, this kind of agonizing insults and name-calling can be found in some of the discussion in the Somali Makhaayad. This is why the phrase "*fadhi ku dirir"* –which has a negative connotation–, has become a name that is broadly used to explain any political conversation in the Somali Makhaayad, street corners or any other meeting place. Explaining the *fadhi ku diris* in Somali Makhaayad Shire (2011) writes:

> "In the places where Somalis come together to drink coffee, wherever they are located, the arguments are always initiated between those who meet there. They engage in debates by a clan on clan, group on group or on how they disagree on their views" (Translated from Somali)

The fragmentation of Somalia that ensued by the volatile situation of the country has offered patent opportunities for the warlords and religious faction to influence the public opinion of the Somali people through *fadhi ku dirir*. Apparently, the former groups have utilized their immediate clan leaders and elders to steer the public opinions. Using money and power they have convinced these elders to mobilize, through public gathering, the young men of their clans to participate in the battles intent to defend the interest of their clans. As a result of this, some of the Somali traditional elders have endorsed incursion against other tribes whom they might regard as their enemies. However, the latter has employed religious scholars and teachers to spread their ideology into the public sphere. The influences of these two groups in public opinions are evident in the Somali public sphere within Makhaayadaha.

In recent years, new trends have been added to Somali the public sphere or *fadhi ku Dirir* as many would call it. The leaders of fighting faction in the country–either they are warlords or religious factions –have established their own media apparatus to influence the public opinion and mobilize their supporters by disseminating clan or religious ideologies and propagandas that might lead many people to fight for them (Mohamed 2012). In this way, the information spread by this media has been always the core discussions in *fadhi ku diriirs*; so

they have had huge impacts on the formation of the public opinion (Ali 2012). However, the discussions in the *fadhi ku dirir,* whatsoever, have been neither rational nor critical debates or civic discussions; but they were, according to Ali (2012), shouts and quarrels which sometimes ensued both oral and physical attacks between those engaged in discussions.

Figure 3: Picture of Fadhi ku Dirir from http://www.warfaafiye.com

5.6   Fadhi ku dirirs and Somali media

Even though it is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to briefly outline the role of Somali media in the public sphere (Fadhi ku diri), because it provides some insights about how Somali people are good at creating and easily disseminating clan propagandas to publicize them. Not only that, but it will also offer a very useful information for the analysis and contextualization of Somali Paltalk forums as people are able to link or connect the larger Somali media outlets (Television and radios) that are accessible over the internet.

In the aftermath of the Somali state collapse in January 26, 1991, when the former military regime of the country was toppled, the rebel groups that were united to depose the military regime had started to fight among themselves (Ricciuti 1993). A widespread disorder, absence of law and order and lack of governmental institutions had flattened the country to the ground. It gave a way to the rise of various clan militia and warlords who divided the society into opposing groups (Mohamed 2011). Since then time, the Somalia has been under a situation wherein clan conflicts, rivalry and hatred has become the core codes of the social life of the Somalis who lost trusts among themselves.

In the early periods of the conflict, specifically from 1991 to 1995, the idea "My clans against Yours" or as Peterson (2000) puts it, "Me Against My Brother", has immediately spread across the Somalia. Everywhere in the country, people have killed each other on the bases of their clan background. Carnages, rapes, lootings as well as other horrible crimes have become normal, particularly in Mogadishu and other major cities in southern (Kapteijns 2013; Ricciuti 1993). In that horrific situation, when deep seated clan ideologies and political rivalries, have led the people of Somalia to slaughter each other, the mass media in the country have played a significant role in spoiling the public sphere of the Somali people. Radios have especially spread hatred and hostility by disseminating message which drew the people to form a public opinion supporting the bloody clannish ideology that ensued the attacks on normal civilians. In a country that lacks the fundamental state institutions, the control over the media and communication mediums are hugely important. Therefore, it is no wonder that the media machineries in Somalia were either directly controlled by or allied with warlords (Hansen et al. 2011) in order to manipulate the public sphere and have absolute influences on the public opinion (Mohamed 2011; Mohamed 2012).

In Somalia, the different media machineries of the ousted military regime, has been taken over by some of fighting factions' leaders who then used them to cheer on their clans to participate in their war against other clans (Mohamed 2011; Mohamed 2012). There were also others media machineries, mainly FM radios, which were set up and financed by individuals who had good ties with faction leaders.

At that time radios were the sole provider of news and information to millions of Somalis; hence, they enjoyed a huge number of audiences. It was therefore easier for radio that were controlled by faction leaders or their allied individuals, to spread the war agendas and incite a widespread violence ideologies across wider publics (Mohamed 2012). In Somalia, the private owned radios were the most instrumental media that facilitated to the creation of an atmosphere sanctioning the terrible suffering and the ensued "clan cleansing" (Kapteijns 2013) which took place in the country between 1991to 1993. To foster the conflict these radios disseminated fabricated news combined with historical tales of previous incidents, such as aggressions between clans. According to Mohamed (2012) when such made-up events and the historical tales of perpetual aggressions, which might perhaps did not happen, or were committed by a few number of individuals is inclusively generalized to the members on one

particular, were broadcasted, they immediately activated hostile ideas which led to widespread violence in which some lineage groups were targeted (Mohamed 2012). Members of these targeted groups were selectively attacked, killed or at times captured on the basis of their clan belonging.

In war zones, like Somalia, where the conflict is between lineage groups, "rhetoric of exclusion" or "othering" becomes especially powerful" (Kapteijns 2013) when the dominant leaders – e.g. clan elders and warlords – start "to use it in the public sphere and combined it with hate and animosity ideas. Directing such idea publicly against an identified enemy, can legitimize increases violence against that group; hence it creates an effective climate of impunity, and consequently, an incitement to kill (Kapteijns 2013). When journalists invite to their radios stations individuals, such as clan elders, warlords, artists and religious leaders might the legitimize the killing of others whom they refer as their enemy, then these journalist are contributing to normalization of violence and declaration of killing. Because, Semelin in Kapteijns (2013) argues, this kind of public declaration provide "those who shall be involved in the [fighting], in advance, with frameworks of interpretation and legitimization of their actions"(Kapteijns 2013:208). This is indeed what happened in Somalia in early 1990s. Most presenters and journalists who worked in the media outlets in Somalia, particularly radios, operated in an atmosphere which supported incentives of conflicts and often pursue regional or clan politics shoring up the interest of their clans (Jamaa 2011). At that time, clans were very vital for the Somali media in the form of real allegiances, where media outlets sent only reports of their clan leaders, their militia, "killings of their clan members as well as other issues touching the interests of their clan" (Hansen et al. 2011:2). In addition to this, many journalists routinely invited to their programs clan elders who would address messages cheering on members of their clans to seek and fight for their rights which has been –as they frequently claimed – violated by a particular clan–lineages who have the control of the country for over hundreds of years (Mohamed 2012). When such reports and messages are aired on, members of the clans whose elders were on the radio, often met together to deliberate the issues addressed by their elders and decision out of what these elders talked about (Mohamed 2012). In the deliberations individual who pledged their allegiance to warlords, quoted harsh speeches of other opposing clans to convince their clan members the imminent thread they might if they don't react. They had also repeatedly addressed hate-group rhetoric to engage the young men in the conflict, and mindlessly to slaughter every person who does not happen to be their clan members (Mohamed 2012).

Explaining the spread of the hate-*group* rhetoric in Somalia, Kapteijns (2013) talks about "*Gubaabo qabiil* (or clan cheering on one's clan)" narratives that seriously flared up hostility and animosity among the Somali people. She argues that, at the time when the Somali conflicts reached to the stage where *clan-cleansing* activities were systematically occurring in the country, hate-narratives, or *gubaabo qabiil,* were circulated in private or semipublic spaces among people who shared the clannish identities they reinforced and transformed (Kapteijns 2013). Kapteijns also contends that the circulated hate–narrative directly or indirectly entered the Somali public sphere in public speeches by politico-military leaders, in broadcast or publicly performed songs, and otherwise (Kapteijns 2013). According to Kapteijns (2013) these hate-narrative, which presented members of particular clans as an outsider or "allochthonous", who had no rights to reside in the major parts country that was not considered as the original homeland of their lineage, strengthened the prominent role of warlords to steer the public opinion of their clans. It privileged them to have a decisive ability to control and guide the political deliberation of their clans to where they want. Accordingly, they got the ability to use the mass media to mobilize and engage the society in fights against each other, and against any efforts trying, and with the best intention, to bring peace and stability in the country. In this regard, Jamaa (2011) points out that the destruction of Somalia is reflected in its media outlets, which is "embryonic, disjointed and often partisan". He contends that an explosion of the alarming number of media outlets proved "to be a blood-sucking monster whose monstrosity spawned hatred and animosity that is spreading like a malevolent fire only to claim more death and destruction" (Jamaa 2011). These media outlets, particularly radios at the beginning, and later websites, pointed to the use of coded messages and hate-narratives to enhance violence and political division. These broadcasted hate-narratives were combined with idiomatic expressions, poems and songs that were intended to motivate the members of the same lineage group to stick together and fight for their clan interest even if they were wrong interests (Mohamed 2012). As a result of this, the media outlets in Somalia ostensibly fronts for the destruction of a nation already ruined by conflicts, deep seated clan politics, rivalry and hostility.

Over the years, every strong warlord came up with a media machinery to distribute and disseminate their palpable propaganda aimed to compensate their political interest and that of their allied groups. To add more, Hansen et al. (2011) write in their report *"Mapping the Somali media: an overview"* that some of the Somalia media might function as "inciters of

violence in some situations; often where the interests of the faction or clan they back is at stake(Hansen et al. 2011). However, they did not rule out the role Somali media might play in promoting peace–building process under the war circumstance and risks they are subject to. According to them, despite the fact they might run the risk of being targeted by any of the warring factions, some of the media outlets in Somali actually attempted to promote peace– building and national building, (Hansen et al. 2011:1)

In afterward years of the conflicts, specifically in late 1990 and early 2000s, new waves of Somali new media outlets begun to appear. As soon as the internet services reached the country 1990s, online activities have suddenly exploded. Since then, the Somali online media has been "extremely vibrant with a large number of different media forms presented" (Hansen et al. 2011:3) This new media not did change that much the clannish behavior of Somali media. It has even made it more complicated as every clan; sub-clan or sub-sub clan came up with their websites to broaden their ideology and spread their plain propaganda aimed to offset the interest of some members of the their clans (Mohamed 2012). In addition to this, there has also been an explosion of privately owned homepages and websites, whose owners propagate, for the sake of their own reason and interests, matters of events that occurred in a particular place in the country. These websites which I previously discussed elsewhere (see Mohamed 2012) and defined " *Online Warlordism"* continue to spoil the Somali public opinion by spreading venomous ideology. To mention very few of them, Waagacusub.com, Shacabkamedia.com Dayniile.com, Kismaayo24.com and Waamonews.com are among most well-known of such websites. Hiding in the shadows of Article 21[18], under which freedom of the press, radio and television and all other forms of information and ideas, dissemination by means of public telecommunications is guaranteed (ICCPR 2006). Using these principles, the owners of these websites, among others, disseminate information which might sometimes create problems among the Somali society who is already fragmented into hostile clan groups. Arguable they have had "an acid tongue to further move Somalia into the edge of a dangerous abyss leaving the country's peace plans to precariously hang in the balance forever "(Jamaa 2011).

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[18] Article 21 - Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information, states *that "*Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.

Although, as a fact the Somali media machineries owned by the private individuals has been spoiling the public opinion of the Somali people for over decades, it appears now that this situation is progressively changing. Thanks to the establishment of telecommunication technologies in the country which revolutionized the communications among the entire Somali society. The Somali telecommunications companies, like Global Internet, Golis Telecom, Telesom, Somtel Olympic and others as well, has opened new gates for the Somali people to regain their social cohesion and trust which were fragmented on clan and religious basis during three decades multi-dimensional battle – which all underpinned by clan–ideology, power and influence of politics of the country. These companies have provided internet connections that helped the Somali people who were divided into opposing clans to create online platforms whereby they exchange and share their ideas in ways that have never been possible through any other communication mediums.

Although, the services provided by these companies were limited in their cybercafés where people could come and use the internet, they expanded their services and begun to offer a variety of services, such as DSL, wireless and mobile satellite broadband, for private establishments and cybercafés throughout the country. This expansion has exploded internet activities of the Somali people who use it to maintain their contacts with others by sending emails and chatting online with their family members in Somalia, Europe, and North America, so as to keep them updated on the situations in their country and vice versa.

Figure 4: Internet Cafés in Mogadishu and Garowe.. Source: www.sabahionline.com

The use of internet by Somali represents as a communication medium, a platform for discussion and socializing spaces where they meet and chat with old friends with whom they were separated when they left their homeland, with friends living in the Diaspora, and with those individuals with whom friendships were formed while they were in the Diasporas. This connectivity has allowed many individuals, who have been divided, because of the conflicts, into groups with opposing political ideology, to come together on the social SMS and conduct free and inclusive debates on various issues their common concern. In this way, the SMS, particularly the Paltalk, has some sort of revolutionary impacts on Somali society. The online forums and chat rooms established the Somalis on SMS have paved the way for the emergence of new Somali spheres where the good willing people –who have never been involved in the civil wars –could come together and, by challenge with war oriented clannish ideology, encourage members of the SOC to engage in discussions promoting stability and durable peace in the country.

Although, the efforts of these people have positively initiated new online channels for political and social dialogue for Somalis, yet the online Somali platforms are not completely free from division and ideological fragmentations. There are still many Somali groups –not necessarily clan groups –who still have the ability to use the internet for the best of their groups and individual interest. These groups are, to some extent and by the use cultural dogmas and religious beliefs, able to manipulate the public opinion and pursue the young generation to financially support and fight for their ideological paths. Evidently, supports of some of these groups, to mention al–shebab at least, have established active various online platforms and websites for mobilizations, especially to propagate their political ideology. Such web based mobilizations have "been frequent and political factions within Somalia have often used the internet for mobilization, especially to get funds or disseminate propaganda (Hansen et al. 2011). According to Hansen et al. (2011) those who used the internet as a political propagation tool in Somalia includes the warlords, sharia courts, individuals within the TFG leadership, regional States and the Shebab, the latter hosting question-and answer sessions on Paltalk, as well as the opportunity to send questions to the former spokesperson Muqtar Robow "Abu Mansoor" (Hansen et al. 2011:7).

6 Chapter Six: Paltalk forums and Somali online community (SOC)

6.1 The Paltalk

Of all SMS, perhaps the chat rooms are the most effective and popular types of the online of forums which have informally developed inventive ways in which people get the best opportunities to interact and engage dialogues with some resemblance to every day face to face interactions. They are, in fact, new meeting points where interaction prevails over linearity in communication processes and boundaries of time and space are blurred (Peris et al. 2002). These forums are, in contrast with the Web pages, Bulletin board, and Usenet groups systems on which contents are posted (Bailey 1995), meeting places which allow many people to congregate and inclusive engage dialogue (James 2010). Not only that, but on these forums people can listen in on conversations and read people's views as they tumble down the scream (Schmookler 1999). Such an environment presents significant opportunities for many people to carry out discussions and present their views on various issues, include politics, music, social, religion and also education. Some of these of forums (i.e. the chat rooms) even go further by allowing hundreds of people to participate in video and voice conferences within a single chat room. In this way, they obviously reach out and influence the public opinion millions of people.

The Paltalk (www.paltalk.com) is one of the most popular websites which offers such kind of forums. It has over thousands of online forums and 16 video streaming patents on which more 4 million of active members are registered worldwide and nearly 100,000 of these members are online at time to simultaneously discuss about politics, religion, sports and also music (Shaer 2012).

Figure 5: The Paltalk

The Paltalk is actually an edutainment website which provides information infrastructure, technology and other services that enable many people to identify and close skill gaps quickly and effectively, albeit many people are unaware of it, and growing number are installing and actively make a use of the serves provided by it (Shaer 2012). Today, it

> "…powers the largest collection of video-based communities and has continued to grow since it was launched in 1998. Paltalk now boasts millions of active members with nearly 100,000 people simultaneously chatting in rooms engaged in lively dialogues, meeting new friends, trading stock tips, singing karaoke and attending family reunions"(Finnegan 2010).

According Barrish (2008) the Paltalk helps members of online community to be connect with each other and conduct debates through voice and video conferences, including new PC-to-phone calling options. It is, in this regard a "premier real-time, video-based community pioneering the new social casting movement" (Barrish 2008). The Paltalk brings together the traditional broadcasting media, social networking, user-generated content and video chat (Barrish 2008). On the Paltalk, there are thousands of forums created under different sections, such as regions, and topics (see figure 6) where every user can participate in discussions taking place in the chat room that he/she prefers to be member of its users. The users of the

Paltalk can join, depending on the subscriptions they have, multiple forums and simultaneously participate in the discussion in these forums (Barrish 2008).
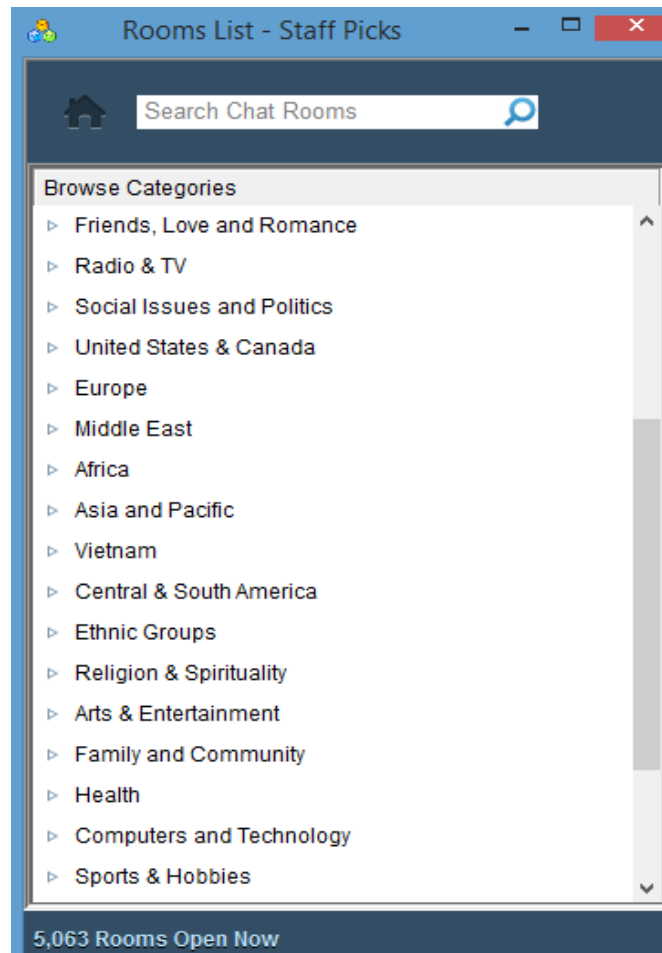

Figure 6: List of Paltalk Categories

Because of the services it provides and the ability of its users to intact and participate in any discussions within the any forum, the Paltalk has the same characteristics of the SMS that are stated in the above literature (see section 5.2). First, it is a network that allows its users to freely interact and participate in debates on various issues. Second the Paltalk forums are open to any who is willing to participle in discussions. Third, as stated previously elsewhere in this section, the Patalk host one of the largest online community. And lastly it allows its user to stay connected with each round the clock.

6.2 Somali Paltalk forums as public sphere

Habermas (1974) describes the public sphere as an arena in our social life where "something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas 1974:49). This public sphere comes

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into existence when citizens communicate in order to express their opinions about matters of general interest and subject them to rational discussion (Edgar 2005). According to Habermas (1974) "A portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public opinion" (Habermas 1974:49). Thus, through the arena of the public sphere, individual citizens freely come together to exchange their opinions and discuss, without any restriction, issues of common concern.

As discussed previously in chapter three (see section 3.1) Habermas (1989) includes his conception of the public sphere a list of criteria which defines his ideal: *disregard of status*, *common concerns* and *inclusivity*. According to him, all must be treated as equals and social status must play no role within the sphere. The discussions within the public sphere must involve matters of public concern and access to the public sphere must be open to all, hence they will be able to assemble freely and express their opinions without coercion; no one with the competency to speak should be excluded (Chambers 1995). With these criteria of the public sphere, answers to sub-questions of thesis draw from the research data obtained from two Somali Paltalk forums.

For a public sphere to exist and function effectively, Habermas (1989) argues that all respondents must be equal, and that status must be disregarded altogether. According to him social standing should not be a pre-condition to participate, nor should it influence the debate. Therefore, all citizens would come to the public sphere as equals, so that the validity of an argument could only sway the discussion (McKeon 2004). This criterion of the public sphere is used as an analytical term to address the first and second sub-questions of the research: *Who participates in the debates within the Paltalk forums; and how their ideas are judged in the discussions?*

However, before moving on to answer these questions and embark discussion about the roles of the personal status and ranks in the Somali Paltalk forums, this section outlines briefly, in order to provide a deep understanding of the subject, the role that social standings, wealth, occupation and hierarchy played in the discussions within the Somali public sphere. It also highlights some observations which I M Lewis (1961), a British anthropologist, wrote about the role of nobility in Somali traditional meetings (or *shirs*), and who have had the right to participate in the discussions Afterwards, it goes on to underline the viewpoint and experiences of some of the research respondents and then continues to discuss if the Paltalk

forums might be an alternative public sphere where status, ranks, and prior reputation of the speakers are disregarded during the discussion.

The idea of status, social hierarchy, and nobility among the people has been through history embedded in and understood through the culture and social lives of human societies(Brown 1988). Accordingly, people are, in every society, stratified and categorize into the ranking of socio-economic tiers based on factors like social status, wealth, occupation and power (Levine 2006). In the context Somali society, stratifications are a part of their daily component as kinship ties are considered to be of extraordinary importance. They are culturally divided into segmented and ranked clan groups (Samad 2002). Therefore, clan grouping in Somalia is the most important social unit, wherein membership plays a central part in Somali culture (Lewis 1994)

According to Samad (2002) the Somali clans are basically grouped accordingly with male progenitor whom they are related to and the traditional occupations they hold. Thus, in Somalia the elite clans are, as in all caste societies, classified as noble and "pure," while those at the other end of the ranking are considered outcasts and impure, or "polluted." (Samad 2002:1). The clan classification, which defines the nobility of Somali person, also defines the roles that individual within the different clan groups play in public debates and discussion within the public sphere. As previously discussed in chapter (see chapter 5), the Somali public sphere consists of three different arenas, the *Madal, Ardaa* and *Maqaayad,* that are different in terms of who has the right to participate in the *shirs* and discussions in them. Lewis (1961) contends, in his book "the pastoral democracy" that all adult men in the same lineage who are classed as elders (oday, pl. odyaal) have had the right to participate and speak in counseling (*shirs)* which deliberates matters of common concern; however, he notes, the traditionally marginalized bondsmen of Midgo, Tumaalo, and Yibro were excluded from a direct participation in the important *shirs* of the noble lineage to which they attached (Lewis 1961). Women were not also allowed involve in public affairs and participate in the public sphere discussion. Their functions were limited only to the private sphere.

Perspectives and views explaining the same inequality tendencies in Somali public *shirs* were presented by some respondents of this research, whose community has experienced through history total marginalization from the mainstream public sphere of the Somali people. For

instance, Aweys[19], a man who belongs to *Bantu* communities inhabiting in riverine areas of the southern region of Somalia said.

> I am *Jareer*. Do you know what to be *Jareer* means in the Somali traditions? It means deformation, segregation and exclusion. The simplest things that can man do was to express his ideas and participate in the discussions. We were not allowed to express our views in any discussions which its outcome would have had impacts on our life. The only way that we could express ourselves was through jokes, songs and dramas (Aweys).

He further explained that the social exclusion in Somalia was not only unique to his Bantu community, but other community has also experienced the same marginalization or worse.

> It is not only us, the *Bantus*, who experienced such exclusion. Midgo Tumaalo, and Yahar (Yaxar) are even worse than us. Our physical appearance is pretty different than that of the vast majority of the Somalis people, for that reason, we are not that much assimilated with them. Majority of our community members lived together as a community in own separate areas around the two rivers. Therefore, we have our own separate sphere where we mind our affairs and deliberate, without any influences from other clans, the issue which matters our lives as a community. But, other marginalized groups, like Midgo, Tumaalo and Yahar, are different than us. Their physical appearance is not different from others, therefore, they always attached to a lineage group that is superior to them. In this way, they are divided between all Somali clans and don't have, like we do, an area that they inhabit. In this respect, they do not exist as a community.

The observations above indicate that clan status is a critical precondition to participate in the discussions within the Somali traditional meeting in the *Madal*. They also indicate how members of the society are systematically blocked from (or denied full access to) main public sphere that are normally available to members of groups who portray themselves as *Nasab* or noble. Although, person's nobility plays a significant role in the Somali public sphere, yet, it is not the only precondition for the participation in discussions within traditional meetings.

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[19] Aways was interveiwed in London 23 .04.2014

For instance, person's age, his reputation among society as well his wealthy (e.g. how many camels, one owns) are also among the vital factor which determined who would participate in the discussions and who would not. Explain this situation Issa[20] said

> All can come to the meeting, but that does mean that all will have the opportunity and rights to speak. Even if you try to speak during the discussion you will be silenced, or if you get the opportunity to talk, your idea would not be accounted at all even if it is good and relevant to the topic in discussion. Even today, it is only clan's rich men and individuals having higher position in the government those get the opportunity to talk and present their ideas in discussions.

Although these claims point to the exclusionary manners of the Somali traditional public sphere, there were very minor reports indicating that exclusions were experienced in coffee-shop and *Fadhi ku dirir* (public sphere) as Sanyare[21] explains:

> Every day, after work time, I go to the Somali coffee-shops in Grønnland[22] to drink coffee, meet with other individuals who come also there. We chat and talk about the current politics of Somalia. People in these coffee shops sit in groups and debate about the current political events of country. These discussions might at times end up in disagreement and on other times in some kind consensus on the debated issue. During these discussions, there might some people who would be orally attacked and called 0.5 groups to remind them they their clans have no roles in the country's politics, but this is very minor.

These ideas have clearly presented clues of how important was the social status and reputation of the person in the Somali public sphere. Accordingly, they also indicated that the Somali traditional meetings cannot be defined as a public sphere, in relation with Habermas first criterion of the public sphere: Disregard of status.

However, when it comes to the Paltalk forums, the respondents reported a quite different idea. The results attained from coded date of the interviews revealed more comparable ideas

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[20] Issa was interviewed in Oslo 16.02.2014
[21] Isma'iil was interviewed in Oslo 16.02.2014
[22] Grønland is a neighbourhood in central Oslo where Somali have several businesses, including coffee houses.

indicating equality among users of two studied forums. All most all of the respondents reported that on the Paltalk forums every individual has the freedom to join and participate in discussions he/she without even exposing his real personal identity. Examples and elaboration of this will be given in the text below.

Most of the respondents who participated in the study mentioned that Paltalk forums are open places where any person can join and share his idea with any person or groups without even knowing them. Aways who, as previously quoted, expressed the deep grievance and discrimination that his community, the Somali Bantu, and other marginalized groups experienced in Somalia through history, reports that the Paltalk forums are free space where all individual, regardless of their identity and personal status, can engage in discussion and be part of the in every debate.

> As a Bantu, we have been throughout history portrayed as a distinct outcast group, and called by the derogatory term 'Jareer' because of clan background and physical appearance, but on the Paltalk forums I am not anymore an outcast person. I can talk about whatever I want, with person, and the way I want. I can express my opinion as others and I have the similar opportunities which everybody else on the Paltalk has.

Aways's idea was supported by Abdi Baari[23], the owner and administrator of one of the observed forums "*QGDWGD*".

> All individuals, despite their clan background and political ideology, get the freedom and opportunity to participate in the discussions in our forum. Every individual has the right to freely express their views without any obstacle as long as they respect other people's views and do not violate the rules of the forums.

In addition to the above-mentioned observation, the results attained from the in-depth interviews and the direct observation of to studied forums indicate the significant that role that female plays in the discussion and administration of the forums. During the three different periods of the direct observations female speakers were in both forums, QGDWGD and QQUMS, more active than male speakers in the discussions. Interesting, half of the speakers,

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[23] Abdi baari was interveiwed in London 29.04.2014

who participated in one of the debates that took place in QGDWGD forums during the first direct observations, were female. At the time of that debate, the total number of the users who were online was 245 individuals (see figure). However, all of these users did not participate in the discussion. There were only 25 individuals, out of which 16 including the moderator (Nasteexo_1_3) of the forum, were females.
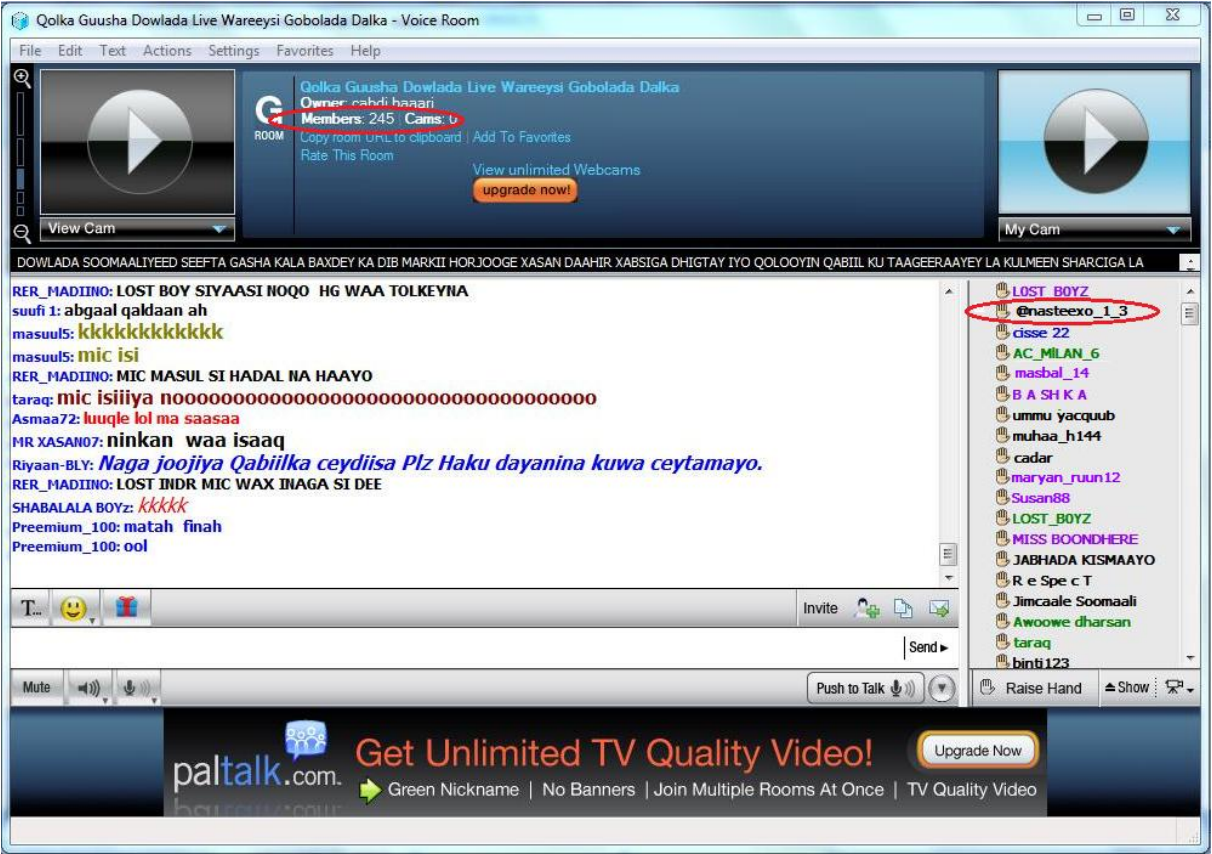

Figure 7: Forum (QGDWGD) Qolka Guusha Dowlada Live wareeysi Gobalada Dalka

Furthermore, the remarkable role that females play in the discussion within Somali online Paltalk forums was confirmed by several respondents. Nasteeho_1_3[24], a moderator and active debater, explains how she directs the topics of the debates and controls that get the microphone to speak on the next when she is moderating forums.

> When my other colleagues and co-moderates like Abdi Baari, the owner forums, are
> not present in the forums, it's me who takes the responsibility to direct the topic of
> conversation. I also follow the text on the display window of forum to prevent vulgar
> and make sure that no one posts on the display window, offending messages, such as

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[24] Nasteexo was interview in Oslo 24.02.2014

insults and explicit adult messages which is not normal and ethical for our people (Nasteeho_1_3).

Another female respondent, Rahma[25] reported that her active participation in the discussion in the Paltalk as female is a privileged opportunity provided to her by the technology. According to her, women's ideas did gain no recognition in the face to face conversations within male dominated Somali public sphere, but on the Paltalk forums their ideas are becoming popular and judged principally by their merit and not their gender identity.

> In the Somali traditions, we are women and our ideas were "talk of woman" (Hadal dumar).But on the Paltalk that discriminate mentality doesn't exist anymore and we are judged according to our ideas and not our identity as women (Rahma).

In the Somali paltalk forums, especially in our forum, QGDWGD, Abdi baari reports, people are judged according to their talent to address and express their arguments in the discussion. He contends that QGDWGD open and accessible to any person who wants to freely and fairly participate in discussions. Furthermore, as can be seen from the observation above, QGDWGD is a public platform which promotes "a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether" (Habermas 1989:36). In the discussion within the QGDWGD forum, the ideas and opinion which are presented by speakers rely on their internal logic for credence, rather than on the prior reputation of the speakers. For that reason QGDWGD seems to meet Habermas' criterion of disregard of status. Alongside this criterion the idea of inclusivity in the public sphere has been used to figure out whether the Somali Paltalk forums are alternative public sphere. This idea holds that public sphere must be universally accessible and never close itself off into a clique; this means that all citizens should have equal opportunity to enter the public sphere, participate in discussion, and openly express their opinions without the coercion of others. In addition, citizens should also participate in the public sphere as private individuals and do not represent anyone other than themselves (Habermas 1989).

As discussed in the above in the above text, nobility based on clan belongings has been always very important in Somali culture. The cultural organization of the Somali society

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[25] Rahma was Interveiwed in London 10.05.2014

which based on agnatic lineage type (that is descending on father's line) called a clan. In this social organization, individuals trace their descent through male ancestors in order to establish their clan membership (Mohamed 2007). Therefore, all Somalis belong to genealogical lineages, which also function as their basic political units. According to Lewis (1961 cited in Gundel, 2002) "segmented clan system is the bedrock foundation of the ... Somali society and 'clannishness' ... is its natural divisive reflection on the political level" (Gundel 2002:136). As a result, clan-system in Somalia is the most important constituent social dynamic among the people of Somalia. In this traditional organization, the ideological conceptions of inferiority through investing clan membership with definitions of linear purity are accommodated within the daily life practices of the Society. Therefore, some components of the society has been traditionally characterized and regarded as a caste group. This caste stratification in the country has been directly related to various aspects of people's lives, such residence, occupation, political and civilian opportunities, and also status throughout life (Samad 2002).

Since clan belonging has been the basic social unit which characterized person membership in the society, it has also defined the roles that individuals play in the public sphere, and who has the right to participate in the "*Shir*", where political affairs of the society were deliberated. According Lewis (1961) the marginalized *sab* bondsmen were traditionally excluded from the direct participated in the discussion with Somali in political affairs and discussion within the *madal* arena in the Somali public sphere. It was always the elderly reputed noble men who had the right to participate in the discussion, and whose idea was inclusive. To take the discussion further, women, although they always played a crucial role as bearers of loyalties between lineage, clan, or kin, were excluded from public arena of *Madal and Maqaayad,* and they were restricted to the private domain *of ardaa* and domestic confines. Even, if relevant ideas and views of women were, in one way or other, mentioned in the discussion, they were ignored because they were just women's perception "Arragti dumar". In this way, women and their idea were traditionally unheard in Somali public sphere as reported one of the female respondents in the study.

> In our Somali culture, it was always the male who deliberated and made the decisions which will affect our lives. As women we could not sit with men in public, discussed with them about issues of common our concern, and address our opinion whatsoever. If any woman tries to do, it would eventually become an embarrassment to her family,

especially to her father and brothers, who would then be labeled to be weak men. This tradition is still in practice among the Somali people even today. If you now walk into any Somali coffee shop in Bole Mekeil[26], what you would see men sitting groups and discussing Somali politics and you hardly find a single woman among them. Unfortunately, our position as a female in the social life is to remain home and take care of the domestic issues, such as cooking, raising kids and nevertheless obeying our husband's decision, even if they are wrong about it[27].

Despite the fact that the Somali culture excluded them apparently from the public sphere the ideas and issues of subordinated social groups, such as woman and caste groups, begun–albeit slowly –to gain a king of credibility in the Somali society during the rule of the military regime of the country. When, Mohamed Siyad Bareh, and his Somali Revolutionary Socialist Party (SRSP) adopted the idea of "scientific socialism", they sought to eradicate any activity tended to enhance the importance of the clan (qabil) affiliation within government and civil society. They have also formed in 1977 the Somali Women's Democratic Organization (SWDO) to encourage women's activity in the public arena of the Somali society (Wieringa 1995). The intention of eradicating clan affiliation and women's exclusion from the public arena was to induce equality among the Somali society and increase the level of the social and political inclusion in the country. In fact, the opinions of the women and subordinate groups were obviously inclusive. Even supposing that, the subordinate groups, particularly the midgo, tumaalo, yibiro and jareer, relatively enjoyed some kind of public inclusions during the earlier years of the military the regime; however, they once more become marginalized and excluded from the Somali public sphere after the military regime was collapsed in 1991. In following decades in which Somalia was under the rule of the gun, the culture of using the gun as the means to govern the public opinion was the popular method used by the political motivated armed faction leaders to establish the power base. During these periods subordinate segments of the Somali society were completely marginalized and excluded from the public arenas. It was only in 2000, during the Somali peace conference in Arte, Djibouti, that individuals from these groups attempted to expressively present at least their concerns and have their voice heard. Apart from this attempt of those finger-counted individuals, (most of them politicians), still the majority of these groups remains exclusive.

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[26] A one of the Addiss Ababa- Ethiopia *neighbourhood*
[27] Malyuun, interviewed in Addis Ababa 16.07.2014

However, in the face of this social marginalization and exclusion which some segments of Somali society faces in the main public sphere, Paltalk forums seem to provide the marginalized groups with alternative spaces where they could openly meet online with the others (including those who regard themselves as Nobles) and engaged them in debates and explicitly express their views and opinions of the current political affairs of their country. On the Paltalk forums, every all Somalis have, regardless of their clannish background, the opportunity to participate in the discussions and freely present their opinions. Indeed, most Somali Patalk forums, albeit some of them are originally assigned for particular reasons (clans or ideological groups), are open and inclusive. They are also, as expressed by respondents, completely different from the *fadhi ku dirir* sphere.

> In contrast to the face to face interactions where discussions are sometimes closed for individuals of particular surrounds or clans, the Patalk forums are open and inclusive. They are open to any person, who is willing to participate in any debate which is taking place in any forum, as long as that person behaves well, and does use provocative words and insults against the respondent in the forums and their respective clans (Ali)[28]

All of the respondents, who participated in this study, agreed that they all get the same opportunity as others. Ironically more access was sometimes offered to individuals from the subordinate groups holding ideas that offensive to the values and tradition of the Somali culture. For instance, Aways, as he explains, was given an opportunity to challenge in debate with some individuals who belongs to the bigger clans of Somalia.

> On the Platlak, I obviously get more opportunity to discuss and show the Somali people that we are part of the society and that we are even more useful to the society than many of them are. On the Paltalk forums I showed them that, even though have marginalized us, they still depend on us when they need labor force.

When it comes to the women and their participation in the discussions within the Platalk forums, their roles, as speakers and as moderators, were obviously very significant. In fact, individual women played key roles in moderate and directing the topic of the debates.

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[28] Interview made in Oslo 13/02/ 204

> Our opinions were always overlooked by our brothers, fathers and husbands, because we are women. On the Paltalk, we are not anymore ignored; we even play more roles to direct the discussion within Paltalk. We always take initiative to open discussion about stability, prosperity and development in our country ((Nasteexo_1_3),

On the Paltalk forums there are hundreds of Somali women who actively participate in discussion within the Paltalk forums. Some of them even live in areas, like Ethiopia and Somalia, where the internet connection is very poor. Mulki[29] who is one of the Somali women who actively uses and lives in Ethiopia reports:

> In Ethiopia, internet connections are not stable, sometimes they are good and sometimes they are bad; but despite these problems, I attempt to stay connected to the Platalk forums and actively participate in the discussions.

The observation presented in the above text indicates that the Somali Paltalk forums are spaces where all people, including the marginalized subordinate groups and women, can meet to freely participate in discussions. Furthermore, the subordinate caste groups and women have got the possibility to redefine their roles in Somali public sphere discourse and inclusively become active in any communicative actions with the Paltalk forums. In this way, the discussions within the Somali Paltalk forums becomes inclusive, as a result, they meet with the inclusivity criterion which Habermas defines to be one of the main pre-conditional criteria for the public sphere to exist.

Having linked the Somali Paltalk forums with two of Habermas' criteria for the public sphere, i.e. disregard of status and idea of inclusivity, now we move on to examine whether matters of *common concerns* are debated in Paltalk forums. In his conception of the public sphere Habermas (1989) also discusses the notion of a domain of common concern. He includes it in his pre-conditional criteria for the public sphere to exist and argues that "discussions in the public sphere evolve public matters that affect the lives of the entire society as well as problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned (Habermas 1989:36). Habermas maintains that open discussion about matters of common concern conducted by

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[29] She was interviewed in Addis Abab 10.07.2014

individuals who freely assemble is the core element which allows the public sphere exists and become genuine. So, for him, the public sphere comes into being only when private individuals voluntarily convene to form a public body to discuss publicly matters of their common interest (Habermas 1974). Likewise, the Somali Palatlk forums come into existence when people login them to carry on the discussion. This resemblance of Somali Palatlk forums appears somewhat straight-forward, because Habermas' public sphere requires people to discuss matters of common concern rationally.

As debates and discussion are the bottom line of Habermas' public sphere the following text will, by attempting to address the fourth research question: *What kind of issues do the Somalis mostly discuss in the Paltalk forums*, elaborate the results from the coded data which was obtained by observing the discussions in QGDWGD and QQUMS, two of the most Somali popular Paltalk forums. In these forums, people are always debating about the current issue of Somalia.

Since 1991, the people of Somali have been socially and politically fragmented into clan bonds and alliances with different political ideology (Shay 2008). This perplexing fragmentation has led the Somali people to adopt a political power sharing system called 4.5[30]. In this system, Somalis are divided into five clusters of clans, who do not link their political orientation to each other, and every cluster of them claims its quota in the power of the country (Uluso 2013). These prevailing political realities in the country have ruined the moral principles, social bond, and trust among the Somali people who historically shared common culture, territory, language, religion, and history. Therefore, to change this grief situation, the Somali online community (SOC) took initiatives to open space where many Somalis who were divided into clans can congregate to debate matters of their common concern. These spaces include the two observed Paltalk forums (QGDWGD and QQUMS) which are open platforms for discussion where any Somali who is willing to participate can take part in the discussion and contribute his/her idea to be best of their country.

During the different period of the direct observation of QGDWGD and QQUMS forums, debates on various issues were observed. Accordingly, Federalism and Regional states, Political struggle between state leaders, Reconciliation and stability were among debate topics. However, federalism and Regional State were most debated topics in all of the three

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[30] 4 bigger clans, Hawiye, Digil and mirifle, Darod Dir, and the Fifth or .5 clan which comprises a group of the smaller)

periods of the observation[31]. These debates have resulted from the adaptation of federal systems and emergency of the regional states. In fact, these two issues, Federalism and regional states, have initiated huge contests among many Somali politician who greedily desires to establish their power bases in the area of the country. The Somali civilian had also begun to discuss the issue in their public platforms. Among these platforms include the Paltalk forum which seems to steadily open new discursive channels for many Somalis.

Since, the provisional Constitution of the Federal Republic of Somalia was adopted on August, 2012, on-going debates about federalism in Somalia and regional states have been conducted on Paltalk forums. These debates are majority between two camps (Proponents and Opponents) that are holding divergent views and idea about federalism. The opponents of federalism for Somalia argue that federalism will invite more clan conflict and bring more trouble into already disintegrated Somalia. A member of this group who was explaining these particular concerns in one of the debates said:

> Federalism is not our system. I will not bring any solution, rather, it will add more trouble create animosity, clan contests and hate among the Somali people who healing from wounds resulted from the mayhem caused by the clan conflict. If we, as many of you arguing for, adapt federalism, the problems will be much worse than the problems which we have today. Indeed, every clan will absolutely try to establish a regional state in there they inhabits and claim to be the majority of that region. We don't need to adopt such federalism, because it is not our System and it will fit with us. That is the reality and we have to face it and end up our disagreements through full reconciliation (Hussein)

The proponents of federalism who were advocating for adopting federalism in the country have put forward another idea which completely different that of opponents. They believed that federalism will usher Somalia interdependence and peace bring it back on its feet as a functioning state.

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[31] The idea Federalism in Somalia was first put forward 1950s, however, it has been renewed again by Puntland State of Somalia, which was established in 1998 as a federal entity of a future federal Somalia (Waldo 2010). Since then, various regional states, some of them existing with one city; others by word only, have been established in the country.

Federalism in clan-based society is frightening from the onset. However, this is the only way to make clans who live together in these regions to be responsible. There will be problems with this, but I am sure that, with strong federal watchdog, this is the best way to proceed. The alternative, which is a centralized government, which we tried, is more disastrous. (Fir-jini)

Alongside, the discussion about the federalism, the other topics of common concern which were also debated on these forums, for instance, one the common concern issues which was intensely debated in the QQUMS forum during the first part of the direct observation was related to the problem of the house and farms that were plundered from their owners during two decades of the conflict. There were also issues critical issues of public affairs, such as the political struggle between state leaders and reconciliation and stability. Since, these issues as well as other matter of the common concern of all Somalis are addressed in the forums of QGDWGD and QQUMS, the Somali Paltalk particularly these observed forums seem to satisfy the requirements and basic principles of criterion: Domain of common concern.

Although the findings of the study revealed some indication showing that observed Somali Platalk forums are, in line with Habermas preconditions, an inclusive online public sphere that are accessible, the results cannot be generalized to entire Somali society as internet penetration and accessibility in Somalia and people's ability to use new technology are questionable. There are many people, namely the poor people, who because of their socio-economic status cannot get access to the internet. Furthermore, many of the Somalis people, particularly elder generation and those living in rural areas of the country do not have the skills needed to use the new communication technologies and the internet, accordingly they are not able to utilize the technologies, such as the smart-mobile phones, computers, and tablets, to access the necessary network infrastructure on the internet.

6.3 Somali Paltalk forums as platforms for political discussion

The Somali history of the use the Paltalk goes as far back as 1998, when the website was newly launched and very little about the services it provide was known. At beginning the number and the users of Somali Platalk were very few. However, through the years, the number Somali Paltalk users and their forums have increased. Many Somalis in Diaspora established hundreds of forums, and relentlessly invited more users from their real-life networks –e.g. from their friends, family members, colleagues –to join the PalTalk.

Surprisingly, at the time of researching 2013 -2014, the SOC who uses the Paltalk forums was, among all African nations, the community that mostly uses the Paltalk Services. On an average mid-day, there are 68 Somali forums that are open and respectively active. In some of these forums, namely those dedicated to the political discussions, the number of their active users exceeds at times over 240 (see figure 7). Therefore, this section tries to obtain answers to the third sub-question of thesis: *Why does the Somali online community (SOC) use the Platalk forums*
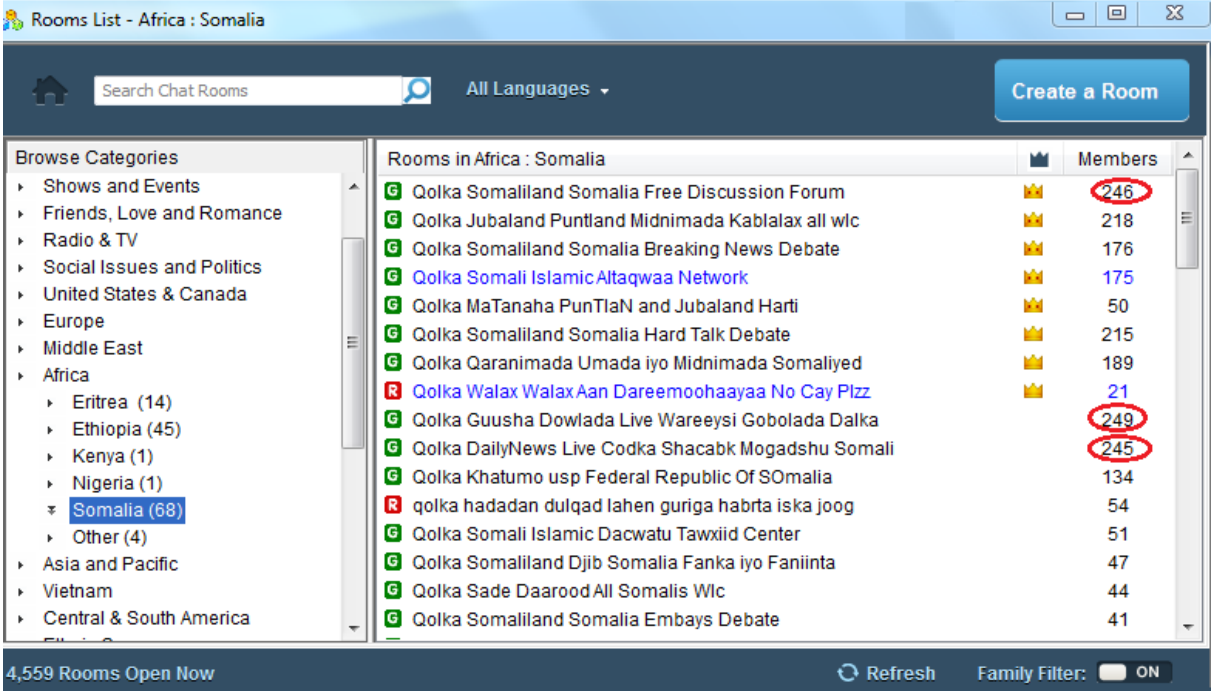

Figure 8: List of the Somali Paltalk forums (from www.platalk .com)

Initially, Somali online community (SOC) used the Paltalk as communication tool and information source. Therefore, as Yusuf explains, Somalis used the Paltalk first to get up-to-date information and stay in touch with friends and families.

> At the beginning, we used the Paltalk to communicate and stay connected with our family members in the Diaspora and also the country. It was also where we seek information about our country; because there was always instance information. Whenever, there are rumors about wars and conflicts happening in Somalia, I usually rushed to the Platalk forums in order to prove what I heard. Believe me, whatever happens in the country, with no delay all information about it, was on the Paltalk

forums even before they are aired on any media. Moreover, in recent years, the Paltalk forums have become platforms for political discussion (Yusuf)[32].

Other, respondents also explain the use of the Platalk forums as a source of reliable information. According to them, most of the Somali media, specifically the online websites, publish exaggerated stories and news in order to generate considerable online traffic and thereby earn money from advertisements. Ahmed[33] explains:

> Most of the Somali media outlets do not produce accurate reporting on events in the country. The information they covered are, most of the time, baseless and biased. For this reason, I rarely depend on Somali media outlets, especially the Somali websites. If need accurate information I login to the Platalk forums, because all the information I might need I can find on these forums. So, whenever reports of new event, developed in the country, appears in the Somalia media, I immediately go to the Platalk forums to obtain additional information on the situation. Then, to filter fabricated news from real news, I compare the information which I found on the Platalk forums with the news broadcasted in the Somali media. This enables me to.

Recently, the Paltalk forums have become platforms for political discussion where the SOC conducts debates, share their ideas with others and engage in discussions. In this way, they have presented unprecedented opportunities for many people to express their views and opinions. In 2006 when Ethiopian troops stormed into Somalia to help shore up the Somalia's weak transitional government (TFG) and oust the ICU that briefly controlled much of the country (Gettleman & Ibrahim 2009), the Paltalk forums become vital spaces for mobilization of ideas to support the resistance against the presence of the Ethiopian troops in the country. In fact, there were several Platalk forums which were internationally created for the purpose of supporting the ICU politically, financially and morally. Therefore, as Ahmed explains, the top leaders of the ICU were several times invited in the QQUMS and QGDWGD forums to participate in the discussions.

> Back in 2006 and 2007, when the Somali people revolted and fought against Ethiopia and its aggression, the top leader of the Islamic Courts Union, Sheikh Hassan Dahir

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[32] Interview made in Oslo 20/04 /2014.
[33] An interview with Ahmed in London 25.04.2014

Aweys was invited to one of these forums to brief the people about fights against the Ethiopian troops who invaded our country(Ahmed)

Generally speaking, the debates on the Paltlak forums are direct reflection current Situation of the country. Somalia; therefore the themes of discussion in the Somali Paltalk forums concentrated on issues related to the war, namely people debated about the possible ways by which they could channel their political, financial and moral support to the fighters participating in the war against Ethiopian invasion.

However, in 2009 when Sheik Sharif Ahmed, the executive leader of the ICU, was elected in as president of the country, the discussion within the Paltalk forums was completely changed. Divisions based on contrasting political views and religious ideology, rather than clans, began to appear among the SOC on the Platalk. Individuals who happened to have the same political view, religious ideology or other affiliations with different fighting factions in the country established their own separate forums, where they invited in the leaders of the faction they support. For instance, Al-shebab[34] supporters had invited several times the top leaders of the organization, while other groups also invited to their forums the leaders of the political entity they support, namely those who supported the TFG regularly brought into your forums individuals within the government systems[35]. These leaders frequently delivered rhetorical speech that would promote more people to favor their ideology and then stand up to support their missions in the country.

Moreover, observations suggest that Paltalk forums, beyond mere discussions and propaganda dissemination, are evidently playing significant roles in fostering the Somali political participations. The principles and assumptions that people hold about politics are acquired through political debates and this is facilitated in the Somali Paltalk Rooms. On the Somali Paltalk forums people participate directly in debates and select the content, unlike other traditional media where the audience is unable to participate in debates. This makes Somali Paltalk an experiential enabling many Somalis who were separated by the conflict to rejoin

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[34] Hansen et al. (2011) reports that al –shabeb leader's hosted question-and-answer sessions on Paltalk, as well as the opportunity to send questions to the former spokesperson Muqtar Robow "Abu Mansoor

[35] Goverment official were frequently invited to the Paltalk forums to encourage the Somali diaspora to come back to Mogadishu and invest city. They used these forums as political outreach by answering question about the security, the war against Alshabab, and also the looted properties.

and learn from each other. The forums that identified themselves as Platforms for political discussions; for instance the two observed have been engaged in raising the reasoning, understanding, and access to Somali politics.

> We always encourage the users in our Forum to make rational and liberal discussions that a modern society makes. In our forums (*QGDWGD)*, moderators directing the debate, raise various issues of concern; mainly current political affairs and take immediate actions where it may be necessary. Since I established these forums I have increased my knowledge of democracy, freedom speech and human rights freedom to participate in politics. I have got an education, up-to-date news and entertainment that I would not have got in my country (Abdi baari).

A country like Somalia, which is transforming from a failed state to a functioning one, people are interested in receiving reliable information about the current political issues on the ground. Thus, the interest and need of information source about the on-going of the political affairs of the country among the users of the Paltalk forums has its roots in on-going debates revolving around regional states, federalism and the political struggle between Somali political elites, including the top leaders of the state as well regional states' presidents.

Use of the Somali Paltalk forums is limited to above discussion areas only, but they are also spaces for mobilization. Well-known Somali figures frequented to the Paltalk forums to mobilize their supporters and get funds or disseminate propaganda. For example, back in February in 2006, when a group of warlords in Mogadishu formed a coalition alliance named "Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT)[36] to fight the Islamic Courts Union (ICU)[37] (Kaplan 2006), the leaders of the fighting parts the ICU and ARPCT were invited to the discussions in Somali Paltalk forums, especially the two observed forums

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[36] Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT) is a coalition of warlords who have been the power brokers in Mogadishu for years. This alliance included, Mohammed Dheere, Mohamed Qanyare Afrah, Musa Sudi Yalahow, Nuur Daqle, Botan Isse Aalin, Omar Muhamoud Finnish, Abdi Hasan Awale Qeybdiid and others. Some of these figures were at that time ministers in the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia.

[37] Islamic Courts Union (ICU); was a group of <u>Sharia</u> courts that united themselves to form a rival administration to the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia. The group fought and defeated ARPCT the alliance which formed by the warlords who controlled the country four over two decades and briefly controlled much of the southern region of the country before Ethiopian troops ousted them

(*QGDWGD and QQUMS*). Since then the Paltalk foums were gradually emerging as space for political mobilization. This has even increased day after day the number of SOC who uses the Paltalk forums as Abdi Baari, the owner and administrator of one of the observed forums "QGDWGD*"* explained

> Before the conflict between the warlords and Islamic courts, the number of those who participate in discussion in my room was always between 80 to 100 respondents. But as the war began, the number of the users in my forums exceeded over 240; and since then, the number has constantly remained to be around 240 (Abdi Baari)

Moreover, realizing that Paltalk forums are spaces where hundreds of Somali people across the world could be easily and political outreach is possible, individuals within the Somali Federal government have been active users of the Paltalk to promote the people to support the political agenda of the government. In fact, there are already a good number of Somali Paltalk forums tasked for political debates that are the most populated forums hosting the vast majority of the Somali Paltalk users. The below table shows some of the popular Somali Paltalk forums, their types, holding capacity, and also the number of the online users (minimum and maximum) who were online in each forum during the initial observation of study.

Name of the Forum	Type	Holding Capacity	Number of users
Qolka Guusha Dowlada Live wareeysi Gobalada Dalka	Political	250	249-250
Qolka Qaranimada Umada iyo Midnimada Somaliyed	Political	250	246-250
Qolka DailyNews Live Codk Shacabka Mogadsho Somali	Political	250	245-234
Qolka Jubaland Puntland Midnimada Kablalax all somali wlc	Political	250	218-230
Qolka Somaliland Somalia Hard Talk Debate	Political	250	215-250
Qolka Somaliland Somalia Free Discussion Forum	Political	250	189-215
Qolka Somaliland Somalia BreakingNews Debate	Political	250	230-176
Qolka Somali Islamic Altaqwaa Network	Islamic Teaching	250	199-175
Qolka Khaatumo USP Federal Republic Of Somalia	Political	250	150-134
Qolka guurka xalaasha ah iyo sheekooyin macaan	Intertainment	250	100-70
Qolka Xoriyada Hadalka iyo Heesaha	Intertainment	250	80-60
Qolka Somali Islamic Dacwatu Tawxiid Center	Islamic Teaching	250	60-51

Table 1: Some of Somali Paltalk Forums

The above table indicates the dominance and the density of the political forums within the Somali Paltalk online community. Unlike other forums, these forums have the highest number and density of users. At the time of the study (2013 -2014), the number of Somali Paltalk forums operating as platforms for political discussions counted 10 to 20 forums, each amassing 200 to 250 active users. These forums include the two observed forums: QQUMS and QGDWGD. In these two forums, the number of the online users permanently exceeded over 200 users during the different periods that direct observations were conducted. The density of these two forums results from the ability of its moderators to invite politicians, warlords, religious functions leaders, civil society activists and also other figures in Somali society, to participate in discussions. Explaining this, Ahmed stated.

> Whenever I am on the Paltalk, I am in one of these forums. Because, in these forums, there are political elites and other Somali intellectuals who are occasionally invited to participate in the discussions (Ahmed).

Majority of the respondents of the study considered the two observed Paltalk forums, QQUMS and QGDWGD, as online political platforms where current political situation of their of Somalia is openly debated; however very few individuals have described these two forums as well as other the Paltalk forums as new *fadhi ku dirir* spaces where inane chatters hold useless talks. According to them the discussions on the Paltalk are conducted by people whose hearts are filled with the hatred mentality of clannish. This group is suspicious are about the political talks and information delivered by and discussed in the Paltalk particularly in QQUMS and QGDWGD, so they just call them *fadhi ku dirir* talks. For them the discussions within these forums are not rational, because they only squabble about issues they cannot do anything about it (Aadan).[38] Furthermore, Aadan reports that QQUMS and QGDWGD are not different than the Somali Paltalk forums where they use of offensive, hate speech, insult and explicit adult chats, which are not normal and ethical for Somali citizenry. Those that are positive about two forums QQUMS and QGDWGD appeared to have entirely opposite views about the Paltalk forums. They generally agreed that these forums provided them a common place where they can instantly express their ideas and views about politics of the country without any hindrance. Moreover, they considered that the information they shared and the political debated in within QQUMS and QGDWGD are meant to successfully

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[38] Aden was interviewed in Jigjiga Ethiopia 19.07.2014

help the Somali people to stand for their rights and express their aspirations to bring back stability into their home country (Ahmed).

In the light of the observations which are demonstrated in the above discussions, the two observed forums–i.e. QQUMS and QGDWGD–appear to be, for the Somali online community1 (SOC), online spaces permitting free discussion of political beliefs and expectations. For that reason, they might be considered to be alternative platforms for political discussions.

7 Conclusion

The Paltalk is a website which provides a communication service which enables its users to easily communicate via video, audio and text chat (Barrish 2008; Shapiro 2009). It allows its users to choose from thousands of forums in which they can see, hear and text each other. They can also set up their own forums of join one offering discussions on a subject of their choice. Therefore, the purpose of the Paltalk uses diverges. Some people use it as a communication and information medium, others as educational purposes, whereas others use the Paltalk forums as platforms for discussion.

Somali online community (SOC) is among the online communities that use the Paltalk forums as forums for discussion. Therefore, this thesis has attempted to conduct a case study on the SOC to observe and find out answers for the main research question of the study: *Are the Somali Paltalk forums alternative public sphere and political platform?* Therefore, it has over a period of one year explored two of most populated Somali forums on the Paltalk – i.e. Qolka Qaranimada Umada iyo Midnimada Somaliyed (QQUMS) and Qolka Guusha Dowlada Live wareeysi Gobalada Dalka (QGDWGD). The exploration of these forums included direct observation and in-depth interviews with members of their active user. The data that were obtained through direct observation and in-depth interview was analysis separately.

In the discussion of the result, the text was divided into sections and each section has presented a discussion addressing answers for one part main research questions by replying such-questions related to that part of the main research question. Accordingly, section (6.2) of the research presents a discussion addressing whether Platalk forums are alternative public sphere, while section (6.3) presents discussion addressing answers whether the Paltalk forums are platforms for political discussions.

Thus, analyzing users' perspectives on equality, accessibility and inclusivity within the Paltalk forums, and the themes they address the discussion through Habermas' theory of the public sphere, particularly his pre-conditional criteria (*disregard of status*, *domain of common concern*, and *inclusivity),* in the first part discussion of the results of research linked the Paltalk forums to Habermas' criteria. Most of the respondents in the study, reported that the Somali Paltalk forums are open space which allow all of their users, regardless of who they

might be, to instantly participate in the discussion, express their opinions and at the same time listens to the ideas presented by other participants in the discussion. Moreover, the observations indicated that the accessibility and the openness of Paltalk forum have encouraged horizontal or equality-inducing aspects within the discussion. The Paltalk also leads the public to discuss matters of the common interest and, where possible, reach common judgment and consensus. In Habermas' idea, the public sphere exists when citizens assemble in public space where they can freely debate and exchange their ideas without coercion of others. Therefore, it is very hard to imagine a public sphere without debates and discussion of opinion, because it's what brings the public into existence. The discussion within the public sphere might have different forms. Discussion about politics is one of the discussions that occur with the public spheres. Thus, since the first part of analytical discussion focused on exploring whether the Somali Paltalk forums are alternative public sphere for the SOC, the second part has tried to look at whether the Paltalk forums might be political platforms where members of SOC conducts debates about political issues. The results of the second part of the analysis have evidently revealed that Somalis use the Paltalk a political platform. In fact, during the different observation period, political leaders, civil society, and other notable individuals, like leaders of the regional-states, have been interviewed mainly by civilians in QQUMS and QGDWGD forums.

From the beginning January 2, 20013, when direct observation started, until December 28, 2013, the QQUMS and QGDWGD, conducted around 52 live interviews with different well-known Somali individuals. In addition to the interviews with political elites, faction leaders and other dignitaries, the QQUMS and QGDWGD have permitted their users to engage in free and inclusive discussion of political viewpoints and expectations. In a country like Somalis, where media disseminated hate and animosity messages rather than encouraging open and free political discourse, the role of Paltalk forums in breaking this dilemma is of dominant importance.

The observed forums, QQUMS and QGDWGD have hosted various political debates which included different views of the federalism and regional states, the political struggle between state leaders, reconciliation and stability as well as other opinion regarding public policies. In general, the analysis presented in this thesis offers direct answers to the main research question and says that the Paltalk forums used by the Somali online community (SOC) are alternative public sphere and platforms for political discussion, because they offer open

spaces where people assemble online and engage in public debates about political issues. The fact that is resulting from the case study of this research has a relatively similar effect and characteristic in the other Somali Paltalk forums purposely created for the political discussion. There were 30 of them within the 68 or more Somali forums on the Paltalk. The users, moderators of Paltalk forums and other stakeholders such as political elites, faction leaders and civil society activist make full use of Paltalk and benefit from it.

However, despite the fact that Somali forums fuelled free discussion and formed public opinion, they did not cause any political changes or trigger any real-world action. That is, although some people, through their participation in the discussion, appeared to be able to influence the opinions of others who participated in discussion, based on their arguments, there were no observed evidences suggesting that such influences were extended to the political decision-making process in their Somali during the time period studied. Thus, the research recommends further study of the influences that political opinions shaped in the discussion with Somali Paltalk forums might have on the Somali politics.

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