



Computer-Mediated Communication Discussion Environment: Electronic Dialogue in a Conflict Situation

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses as case study a discussion mailing list created in January 2000 by a group of the Somali Diaspora. The mailing list, known as Somali Open Forum, was formed to give its members an interactive online discussion that provoked and stimulated online discussion and sharing of viewpoints — an underpinning of classic conflict transformation. The intention of communication was to enable an atmosphere of understanding where members could communicate and come up with ways of solving their homeland conflict, a belief based on the principle “*Let us talk means let us reconcile*”. More tangible, the group not only aimed at accomplishing joint aims, sharing and exchanging information, but also to share emotional support by communicating the suffering and emotional symptoms at the national level. The paper illustrates how web sites enable members of one Diaspora community to keep in touch with a political situation at home that is exceptional, and to involve themselves in its controversies, should they wish to do so. It also shows how the web site has brought a new dimension to traditional methods of feuding.

Keywords: Computer-mediated, Communication, Communication Medium, Mailing List, Discussion Group, Conflict, Somalia, Peace Talks, Diaspora.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mailing environment became the arena where the Somali factional Diaspora has been taking place enabling the groups to organize and communicate. In a way the mailing list medium has facilitated the some groups to take the Somali conflict outside the country. On the other hand, it is also where groups aiming at the supra-national level to meet and get together to help their folks at home. Whatever the objectives of the mailing groups, what influenced their discussions are mainly events at home.

The crisis of 1991 in Somali led to the collapse of the state institutions and the creation of an international Somali Diaspora. Somali mailing lists have been created mainly by the Somali Diaspora for different purposes. There are different types of mailing lists: (a) national level where groups of national interest meet virtually, (b) professional types where professional people communicate and (c) lists where groups meet below the national level.

This paper examines the Somali Open Forum mailing list (also known as SomaliForum). The Somali Open Forum was created with supra-clannic objectives and it planned to provide its members a forum where they could air their

opinion. However, this was to happen in an environment such as that of Somalia at a period of statelessness and civil strife during the late 1990s and early 2000.

The period during which the Forum was formed was also at a time when the Somali state of affairs was getting attention following a new initiative proposed by the president of Djibouti, President Ismail Omar Guelleh, who proposed the initiative at the 54th General Assembly of the United Nations on 23 September 1999. The proposal was to shift the peace talks from the warlord who dominated previous peace talks to the civil society.

The timing of the peace conference marked also the tenth year since the central authority collapsed following the breakdown of the state institutions. The civil strife reached at the stage of abating and war fatigue. The popular support for the solution to the Somali problem was expected to receive a positive response. However, after a few months, the peace conference ended with the formation of a government headed by a former minister of the military regime of Siyad Barre who ruled Somalia with fist hand for 22 years.

The conference outcome, commonly known as Arta Outcome, triggered an intense discussion among the mailing members. The analysis will focus on how participants dealt with the issue and how they positioned themselves in relation to the arising issue.

The paper concludes with some recommendations on how computer-mediated communication can be best applied to contribute peace building process in Somalia.

2. DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/APPROACH

This paper uses as case study a discussion mailing list created in January 2000 by a group of the Somali Diaspora. The mailing list, known as Somali Open Forum, was formed to give its members an interactive online discussion that provoked and stimulated online discussion and sharing of viewpoints — an underpinning of classic conflict transformation. The intention of communication was to enable an atmosphere of understanding where members could communicate and come up with ways of solving their homeland conflict, a belief based on the principle “*Let us talk means let us reconcile*”. More tangible, the group not only aimed at accomplishing joint aims, sharing and exchanging information, but also to share emotional support by communicating the suffering and emotional symptoms at the national level. This research paper addresses the following questions:

RQ1: For which purpose does the Diaspora use mailing lists?

RQ1: What role do Somali mailing lists take in the process of group communication?

RQ1: What made the forum members to fail in their attempt to come together and help their folks at home?

The study examines a discussion mailing list of Somali Open Forum. The research focuses on the content of messages totalled 78 sent between 20 August to 30 November 2000. The mailing list had more than 300 members, but only 24 participants took part in a discussion of about the outcome of the Somali peace talks held in the Republic of Djibouti in 2000. The outcome is commonly known as Arta Outcome, named after Arta, a small town in the Republic of Djibouti.

The analysis focuses on how the participants handled the issue and how they positioned themselves in relation to the issue. It uses both quantitative and qualitative methodology with content analysis [4]. Variables used include:

- The issue: the outcome of a Somali peace talks held in the Republic of Djibouti in 2000. The issue was divided into two topics. The medium was both English and Somali language.
- Participants' opinion in relation on the issue (pro, against or moderate). Discussions and analysis takes in the form of description/narration of behaviour and action of participants.
- Language tone of email

The authors spent time observing the activities of the mailing list. Call and Simmons offer the following suggestion, "Studying people in their natural settings can help to understand the meaning that is used in that world". By being a member of mailing lists the researcher has been an integral part of the researched world.

Following the loss of the national identity caused by the collapse of the state in 1991, Somalis were forced to go back to their clan roots. In such a situation such people endeavour to reconstitute their identities and social meaning by articulating and identifying with alternative discourses. The effect of the rollback of the state "virus" has been that every community has been attempting to rediscover itself. The web page and mailing list as computer-mediate communication offers such a venue.

Particular interest is that mailing environment becoming a major arena where the Somali factional Diaspora has been taking place enabling the groups to organise and communicate. In a way the mailing list medium has facilitated the some groups to take the Somali conflict outside the country. On the other hand, it is also where groups aiming as the supra-national level to meet and get together to help their folks at home. Whatever the objectives of the mailing groups, what influenced their discussions are mainly events at home.

The case study is a "realistic tale" [14]. Studying people in their natural settings can help to understand the meaning that is used in that world (Fielding, 1993: 156). Being a member of mailing list of other web list gave one of the authors an

opportunity to become an integral part of the researched mailing list.

Electronic and face-to-face contact with a number of key individuals was maintained during the course of this research. Findings are being passed on to participants through e-mail and other ways.

The study focuses on Somali Diaspora CMC technology, particularly the mailing list. An email survey is appropriate for a topic such as this. This is because, firstly, Somalis are geographically dispersed and to reach them individually is expensive. Secondly, an email survey is less time consuming than other methods. Thirdly, users could reply at their own convenience and have time to review the questions. One additional benefit of using email is that duplicate responses can be eliminated. Duplicate responses are possible where there is website based-survey.

The intention here is to know what users choose. In other words, this is meant to shore up their preference. By looking at the samples of the answers received, users demonstrate what they think might be true (their belief) and why they actually do (their behaviour). Polland states that,

"The survey is an appropriate means of gathering information under three conditions: when the goals of the research call for quantitative and qualitative data, when the information sought are specific and familiar to the respondents and the researcher has prior knowledge of the responses likely to emerge".

The success of survey research rests on how closely the answers that people give to survey questions matches reality, that is, how people really think and act. According to Polland, there are three things that must be done to increase the response to a survey: minimise the cost for responding, maximise the rewards for doing so and establish trust that those rewards will be delivered.

Building trust between the interviewer and the respondent is also a very important incentive to get responses if the researcher wishes to get good reliable data. Knowing many of the interviewees personally through the mailing list discussions is very useful for the researcher. This helps build trusting relations with most of the interviewees. Some of the members even encourage others to reply to the survey.

3. MAILING LIST TECHNOLOGY

The frequent contact (through electronic mails) creates strong ties between groups. Unlike face-to-face interaction, the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) offers opportunities for social interaction that do not depend on the distance between parties. Face-to-face interaction accompanies some important particularity, such as facial expression, vocal cues, body language, posture, gestures and non-verbal mannerism in general together with style of dress and hairstyle [2].

There is no doubt that Internet technology is having an effect on society. However, it is not always clear what these changes are and whether they are for better or worse. Some

researchers argue that the Internet is causing people to become socially isolated and cut off from genuine social relationships. Others argue that the Internet leads to more and better social relationships by freeing people from the constraints of geography and isolation. According to this view, the Internet allows people to join groups on the basis of common interests rather than convenience [12]. The Somali case favours the latter view. The Internet has provided the Somali Diaspora with a new social environment in which to communicate and organise themselves as groups based on their traditional social groups.

Email may be the most important, unique method for communicating and developing relationships since the telephone. People also find it familiar and safe because it is similar in many respects to writing letters (Suler, 1998: 132). Of all the methods for developing relationships on the Internet, it is the most common - and perhaps the most powerful.

Email is not just electronic mail sent via the Internet, but it creates a psychological space in which groups of people interact. It creates a context and boundary in which human relationships can unfold.

People have always wanted to communicate with each other in the fastest way possible, short of normal conversation. Email is the most prevalent application of this in computer networking. It allows people to write back and forth without having to spend much time worrying about how the message actually gets delivered. As technology grows closer and closer to being a common part of daily life, the need to understand the many ways it can be utilised and how it works, at least to some level, is vital [7].

A variety of software is able to manage electronic mailing lists. Some of these are Majordomo, Mailserv, listproc and listserv (Kannel, 1996: 51). The main purpose of a mailing list is to distribute email messages to a particular list from one address to all of the other addresses or subscribers linked to that list. Listserv technology supports electronic mailing lists automatically: some of these are maintaining subscriber information, generating message archives, preparing digests of messages, and interpreting and processing keyword commands (*ibid.*).

Lists can be public or private, open versus `closed, moderated or unmoderated (*ibid.*). There can be one central list owner, or the responsibilities can be shared amongst several people, each having equal or varied levels of access.

Email topics are carried out into two ways: non-regulated (or causal) and regulated. Any member can start both types. The subject of the mail is usually the title of the discussion. The subject is always at the beginning of the email text, followed by the date, sender's name and email address. Repliers are required to answer without changing the title of the discussion. Usually these non-regulated discussions begin casually and are conducted informally. There are many topics open at a time. Members can reply and add their opinion by choosing any topics. At any given time, a member can participate in as many discussions as he/she may wish.

4. BACKGROUND: SOMALIA PEOPLE

The Somali Republic is bounded by the Indian Ocean to the east, the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea to the north, by Ethiopia to the west and northwest, by Kenya to the southwest, and by the Republic of Djibouti to the northwest corner. Scattered over a territory covering nearly 600,000 square kilometres in the north-eastern corner of the African continent, the Somali-speaking people form one of the largest single ethnic groups in Africa.

Somali mythology links the genesis of the people of the area to an ancient communion between people from the Arabian Peninsula, and the Bantu or Oromo people of the hinterland. But the linguistic and ethno-historical advances of the last two decades, with the help of Africa's oral historians, have allowed a more in depth exploration of the Somali past and have established that ethnically and culturally Somalis belong to the Eastern Cushitic ethnic group (Hersi, 1977).

The Somali people have a strong sense of cultural and linguistic unity. The received wisdom on the traditional structure of Somali society traces it through an elaborate genealogy to two brothers, Soomaal, also known as Samaale and Sab. The followers of Soomaal for the most part led a pastoral-nomadic life whilst the followers of Sab exercised an agro-nomadic lifestyle [9]. The Dir, Darod, Isaq and Hawiye clan-families are the descendants of Soomaal. Rahanweyn and Digil are descendants of Sab. The majority of the Somali population is constituted from these six groups. In addition there are a number of smaller groups who are mixed with the mainly pastoralist groups such as the Midgan (also known as Gaboye or Madhiban), Tumul and Yibro. These people are well known for their bravery and wit, and the pastoral society rarely go to war without accompanying members from this society.

Besides these groupings, there are some other smaller communities who are centred in the urban, such as the Benadiris, Reer Barawa and Bantu who are live in the riverine area. The largest minority in Somalia is believed to be the Bantu community.

4.1 Past and Present

European colonial intrusion in the Horn of Africa led to the partition of Somali inhabited territory into five different political entities: British Somaliland, Italian Somaliland, French Somaliland, Western Somaliland (known commonly as the Ogaden) and Northern Frontier District.

The Constitution of the Somali Republic promulgated in June 1961 stressed that Somalia becomes a unitary republic with a representative democratic form of government. Nevertheless, the new classes of political leaders gallantly tried to set up democratic practices, but they were incapable of mustering their energy to generate economic and social change. Soon, Somalia was experiencing all kinds of democracy's ailments, and the deepening of corruption and the incompetence of the civilian government were deflating any democratic benefit. Emphasis was on party politics and personal power rather than on mobilization for national development.

Before a solution to the languishing democracy could be found, the situation took a new turn when, on Wednesday 15 October 1969 during a tour, President Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke was assassinated in Las Anod by a member of his own police force. The situation was taken advantage of by the army, which seized power on Tuesday 21 October in a 'bloodless coup'.

The takeover was widely welcomed and was seen as giving relief from the political and social tension built up by the party system [1]. The military junta suspended the Constitution and the Supreme Court, closed the National Assembly and barred all political parties (Issa-Salwe, 1996: 4). The early liberal ideology of the modern Somali state, which later degenerated into tribal polity, had now been replaced by a socialist ideology.

Top priority was given to the establishment of a strong intelligence network which soon the jubilant welcome, which the coup d'état initially received, gradually declined and changed to fear. Family members and neighbours were encouraged to spy on each other and report to the security agency.

The government reinforced a policy to alienate a section of the society (as collective punishment) which consequently let the decline of the government ability to enforce law and stability, and to mobilise support for its policy. When a group is threatened with coercion, the threat may bring the group together and they may respond with counter-coercion. This reaction may then produce an intensifying of this initial coercion. The result may be an endless upward spiral of aggressive tactics. In fact, these tactics generated and increased people's awareness of clan identity.

Underlying the regime's extensive reforms was the control of the people in the name of national security, and the consolidation of the power of the regime, and in particular of its chairman, General Siyad Barre. A dictatorial form of authority was in the making.

In the early 1980s, the military regime found itself facing clan based oppositions such as Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), Somali National Movement (SNM), United Somali Congress (USC), Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM), Somali Democratic Alliance (SDA), Somali Democratic Movement (SDM) and the Islamic Party which was the only opposition to the regime on religious grounds.

Unable to overwhelm the opposition, Barre tried desperately to hang on until when he was forced to flee the capital. By fleeing, however, he left behind a power vacuum which soon became a source of quarrels between the opposition groups.

On 18 May 1991, the SNM declared the regions under its control (what had constituted former British Somaliland), an independent Somaliland Republic. And on 21 December, 1991, leaders of north-eastern regions agreed to form a regional administration, and in 1998, they formed as Puntland. While Somaliland stood to stand as a separate state, Puntland vowed to remain within the Somali state. Puntland's border encroaches with Somaliland, and for both administrations conflict looked inevitable even during this writing.

4.2 Collapse of the state

The opposition campaigns, started by different Somali groups in the hope of toppling a dictatorial regime, faction leaders sought to replace the military regime with a loose anti-government coalition which quickly fell apart and turned against each other letting the country descend into a "full-fledged civil war and has remained without an effective central government for more than a decade" [11].

A man-made famine was thus in the making as the fighting among the warlords was causing a fragile situation to deteriorate. This worsened the famine triggered by the social crisis and consequently destroyed every aspect of government and organisation in Somalia. By this time any hope of resuscitation of the state was remote.

It was only when Baidoa, a town in southern Somalia, hit the international media as the "City of Death" that the world realised the severity of the situation. For thousands of people this was too late. The looming situation in Somalia prompted a short-lived US-led military peacekeeping operation in Somalia (UNOSOM). Under Chapter VII of the United Nations, UNOSOM (United Nations Operation in Somalia) was to become the de facto government of Somalia from December 1992 to the end of March 1995.

4.3 Recent Developments

Sponsored jointly by Djibouti Republic and the United Nations, in 2000 in Djibouti it was held the 13th Somali National Peace Conference. Made up of local and regional leaders, the conference established a Transitional National Government (TNG) and selected a 245-member Transitional National Assembly (TNA), which elected Abdiqassim Salad Hassan as Transitional President.

And in October 2002, the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD) convened the 14th Somali peace conference known as Somali National Reconciliation Conference (SNRC). The SNRC concluded in October, following the August 29 selection of a 275-member clan-based Transitional Federal Assembly (TFA), which replaced the Transitional National Assembly, and the October 10 elected Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed as Transitional Federal President. In December, President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed appointed Ali Mohammed Ghedi as Prime Minister.

Before the government moves to Somalia, fighting broke out among members of the Transitional Federal Parliament. The incident divided the newly formed federal institution to two groups. One group led by President Yusuf and Prime Minister Gedi, along with a number of members of parliament to establish themselves in Jowhar, a town hundred kilometres to the north of the capital. The other group was led by the Parliament Speaker, Sharif Hassan Sheikh Adan and other MPs chose to stay in Mogadishu. On January 5, 2006, Somali President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed and Speaker of Parliament Sharif Hassan signed the Aden Declaration in which they pledged to end their conflict. The agreement led the interim government to make Baidoa, a town in the south, as the temporary seat of government.

4.4 The takeover of the capital by the Islamists

In early 2006, the Somali capital was taken by an Islamist group called the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) from a group of Mogadishu warlords (including those opposed to the president and the prime minister) who controlled the city since the collapse of the state institutions. The ICU's conquest followed a bloody three months with the warlords who fashioned themselves as the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter Terrorism (ARPCT) whose aim was to get rid of Al-Qaida cells from Somalia. It is alleged that the warlords were funded by the United States and Washington support for the warlord alliance has ended up boosting Islamic militias.

The raise of the Islamists provoked external as well as internal reactions. Externally, Washington and Addis Ababa, both of which share interests with the warlords, reacted worryingly to the lost of power of their allies. In late December 2006 the TFG and its Ethiopian allies routed the Islamists, who then turned to guerrilla warfare. Unsurprisingly the Islamists have the support of Eritrea.

The conflict has caused much suffering. According to figures cited by Amnesty International (2008), approximately 10,000 civilians were killed in Mogadishu and elsewhere in southern and central Somalia in 2007, while over 500,000 people fled their homes. War crimes have been committed by combatants on all sides.

4.5 Somali Diaspora and Mailing list

The violent overthrow of General Mohamed Siyad Barre of Somalia sent Somalia spinning out of control. The subsequent crisis resulted in the disintegration of the Somali state and civil strife which claimed more than three hundred thousand dead and wounded, with roughly four-fifths of the population displaced. Nearly one fifth of the population fled to take refuge in neighbouring countries and other parts of the world [5].

The crisis has created an international Somali Diaspora. One-fifth of the Somali population is now outside Somalia including the majority of the educated and professionals. It is commonly known that with the deterioration of national communities combined with recent developments in the field of communications and transportation enables Diaspora communities to remain deeply involved in the political affairs of their homelands.

Somali mailing lists have been created mainly by Somali Diaspora for different purposes. There are different types of Somali mailing list groups some of which are: (a) national level where groups of national interest meet virtually, (b) professional types where professional people communicate and (c) lists where groups meet below the national level.

The Somali Diaspora has been more enduring than the Somali state. This was because of Somalis living and working beyond the frontiers of the Somali peninsula long before the partition of Africa. The Diaspora — grown much larger and more diverse over the course of the 20th century — became the primary vehicle for the expression of Somali ethnic and cultural identity. It is well known that the Somali

Diaspora helped foster national and pan-Somali sentiments in the 1940s before the formation of the Somali state. Since the collapse of the central government in 1991 their role has been more ambiguous (Cassanelli, 2002).

Since the collapse of the central government, Somali Diaspora has formed a variety of new political groupings and identities. The internal conflict has reinforced the clan-consciousness of the Diaspora, which in turn consolidates the already existing factionalism of Diaspora politics. Every faction Diaspora group has its own mailing list and it may also include a website in its possession.

5. SOMALI OPEN FORUM

Somali Open Forum was formed in January 2000. Hosted by SomaliHome website (www.somalihome.com), it had the host address of somaliforum@egroups.com. The aims of the forum were “to create a means where Somalis across the world could communicate”. How these aims can be made real are outlined as:

1. Create understandings among Somalis at home and abroad
2. Meet lost friends or and make new ones
3. Preserve and protect Somali heritage
4. Teach Islamic principles
5. Create awareness of the danger of the issue of drugs
6. Link Somali academic and students
7. Foster basic awareness about environmental issues which are often ignored but cause serious social, health and economic problems in Somali society.

To ease discussion, the list was to be divided into groups based on their professional skills. Discussion could be general where every member participate, or for sub-groups where professional groups discuss their own topic or subject.

5.1 The Discussion environment

The founders of the Somali Open Forum (hence the Forum) were inspired by a newsgroup called soc.culture.somalia which was formed in late 1994 (email message, 10/05/2004). The soc.culture.somalia is one of the oldest Somali newsgroups, and it was still in existence at the time of this writing. For many years, countless Somalis took part in the newsgroups discussions and posted their opinions.

Membership in the Forum was open for all Somalis. When the list was formed, the management tried to include as many Somalis as possible so the environment could become a place for everybody. The author was also added and received the confirmation of membership shortly after. Members were also of all ages, from different educational backgrounds and skills.

Initially, members of the SomaliForum existed only as a newsgroup. However, after a period of time, the founders thought that it was time to move forward and convert the newsgroup to a mailing list.

It seems that the general mood produced by the Djibouti peace initiative was one of the main factors which influenced the list forum to ‘formalise’ and create an

atmosphere where Somalis could discuss their future state and peace. For all intents and purposes, the Forum viewed communication as a means to solve the Somali problem, therefore, open dialogue was seen an essential element needed by Somalis. It was understandable, therefore, for the Forum that the Djibouti initiatives become one of its main discussion items. Beside the Djibouti initiative, in the first period, discussions centred on the general topic about the Somali crisis.

Soon the Forum became a place of battle between the pro-Djibouti conference and those who were opposed to it. Those against saw the formation of a government under a former minister as a ‘destabiliser’s factor’ and the return of the old clique of the former dictatorial regime, whilst the pro-group saw it as the ‘route’ to the revival of the central state.

EMAIL: 1

---Original Message Follows---

From: MohamoudAbey <quranalone@yahoo.com>
Reply-To: somaliforum@egroups.com
To: somacircle@egroups.com
CC: somaliforum@egroups.com
Subject: [SomaliForum] No to haraagii Afweyne!!!
Date: Mon, 28 Aug 2000 08:38:07 -0700 (PDT)

Salamun Caleykum All.

All Allah-fearing, fair-minded and just Somalis must reject AbdulQassim Salad as our Somali leader. Why?

- !) He was a loyal (Kabo-leef) to Somalia's Hitler until THE END.
- 2) He watched, without protest, the butchering and massacres Afweyne committed against our people in the seventies and eighties.
- 3) He was a member of those policy-making butchers.
- 4) He never opposed or spoke out against injustice, nepotism, and tribalism.
- 5) He watched his close friends executed in public.
- 6) He watched 11 innocent wadaads executed in public for their belief in 1975.
- 7) He is a smelling coward, because when he saw the shit they moulded twenty years blowing up on their faces in 1991, he run away to Cairo.
- 8) He is a man who is self-serving and looks after his interests
- 9) He is an idol worshiper who does not believe in Allah Alone.
- 10) He is an idol worshiper who will not rule by the Quran Alone.

!!) HE IS A DISBELIEVER OF ALLAH ALONE.

No, to any such disbeliever. No to any survivor of SRC.
No to anyone elected through a system based on tribalism.
No to anyone who was a part of a butchering war machine.
La ilaha ilia Allah.
Abey.

Abey was referring to an interview given by Abdiqasim when he was asked by a Reuter’s news reporter “What will you do to the Somalis to believe you?” Abdiqasim replied, “The Quran.”. Abdiqasim meant that he was a man of the Quran and as Somalis are Muslims, they were to believe him as a man of God. Abey was angered by the answer. Through his eyes, Abdiqasim was “not a Muslim (a believer) as he served Siyad Barre, who, according to him, “is also a non-believer”. This is how he put it,

5.2 Frenzied Challenge

On 28 August, just one day after the swearing-in in Djibouti of Abdiqasim Salad as interim president of the Transitional National Government, a member named Mohamoud Abey sent an email to the Forum, attacking the election of Abdiqasim Salad. The subject of email was “No to the remains of Afwayne”. As expressed in Email 1, Abey started by appealing to “All Allah-fearing, fair-minded” to reject Abdiqasim Salad as Somali leader. Abey attacked Abdiqasim’s election and called him a ‘non-believer’ and ‘shoe-licker’ of Somalia’s Hitler (email message, 28/08/2000). In Email 1, Abey explains Abdiqasim served under Siyad Barre’s regime for more than two decades as minister in different portfolios.

“...only the Quran is the Truth, and everyone should be judged accordingly”.
(email message, 28/08/2000)

In reply to Abey’s burst email, two members (Hassan Muuse and Muudey) warned Abey for calling a fellow Muslim a ‘non-believer’. They both cited the Hadith of the Prophet ﷺ which says,

“Whoever calls a Muslim a non-believer, will be out of the *dari*” (email message, 29/08/2000)

EMAIL: 2

----- Original Message -----

From: "MahmoudAbey <quranalone@yahoo.com

To: <somaliforum@egroups.com

Sent: Tuesday, August 29, 2000 9:20 AM

Subject: Re: [SomaliForum] No to haraagii Afweyne!!!

Hassan,

AbdulQassim served, serviced and was a loyal kabo-leef for Afweyne for almost 18 years. What should we call such a bloody criminal? He worked for a *gaal* [infidel] and implemented the policies of *gaal-qudhmuun*. Kab xun iyo xaarkeedba waa la isila' xooraa.

Abey's message instigated a heated debate precipitating an already tense relationship. The days between 28 August and 30 November 2000 were the worst days of the list.

Soon the Forum was divided into those supporting the formation of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and those opposing it. Like Abey, the contra-group's position was based on three points: Abdiqasim's service to the military regime of Siyad Barre, his clan, and his personality and beliefs. Beside the rejection of Abdiqasim's election as transitional president, the contra-group was concerned about Somalia's fate being decided and controlled by 'outsiders'.

The first accusation focused on Abdiqasim's allegiance as minister under the regime of Siyad Barre for two decades. Abdiqasim became minister in 1973 holding various ministerial portfolios until 1990. He remained Interior and Assistant Prime Minister until just before Siyad was ousted from Mogadishu.

The second accusation centred on his clan. Abdiqasim belong to the Habar-gidir lineage, the same lineage as that of General Mohamed Farah Aideed. General Aideed is well known as the man who fought the United Nations and the American forces in Somalia during the United Nation Operations in Somalia (UNOSOM). He also fought against Ali Mahdi Mohamed who was elected as interim president on 29 January 1991 by the United Somali Congress, the armed faction that ousted Siyad Barre from Mogadishu. The ambitious General Mohamed Farah Aideed, who was at that time the USC force commander, challenged the hurried nomination of Ali Mahdi Mohamed to the presidency. The ensuing armed confrontation resulted in thousands of Somalis being killed and wounded as an observer described it, "the smell of blood and decay is everywhere." Fighting between these two groups caused an already fragile situation to deteriorate. Consequently, famine broke out and as a direct consequence of fighting "every aspect of government and organisation in Somalia" was destroyed [6].

Besides the atrocity in Mogadishu, during the height of the civil war in the early 1990s, Aideed's group spread forcefully throughout the riverine areas, thus gaining almost all the important farmland in the south of the country [11]. Their booty stretches from Marka, Lower Shabeelle, through Bay region up to Jamaame, in the Lower Jubba region. Many of the contra-group regarded Abdiqasim's election as 'legitimisation' of the occupied land by the Habar-gidir.

The third allegation was associated with his personality and beliefs. As Abdiqasim served under Siyad Barre, Abdiqasim was to be held responsible as Siyad Barre.

"Wasn't Abdiqasim a believer when he was serving under Siyad Barre for 22 years?" (email message, 29/08/2000)

In another message, Abey brought up the emotional memory of the public execution of ten religious men on 23 January 1975 in Mogadishu by General Mohamed Siyad Barre. The religious men were condemned to death when they resisted the military government decree that amended the Islamic Sharia law of inheritance. The degree gave men and women equal rights under the Family. The religious men accused the regime of attempting to distort *sura Anisa* (Women, IV) — and all matters related to civil status restricted by the Quran and the Sunna — after General Siyad Barre publicly asserted that certain verses of the Quran were obsolete. Many religious leaders openly opposed his interpretation and during Friday sermons they criticised the General's new law. Within hours they were arrested by the National Security Service men and a few days later ten religious men were sentenced to death by firing squad by the National Security Court [6].

From his email, Abey's view could be perceived as that of a Muslim fundamentalist who believed the strict tradition of Islam and that only the Quran is the Truth and that one must be judged through the Sharia.

To discredit Abey, Kayare, another respondent, sent a message which criticised Abey's Islamic belief. His focal point was Abey's email account which was quranalone@yahoo.com and his line of reasoning which believed that only the Quran is the Truth. Accusing Abey of a group of Muslims who believe only Quran and reject the teaching (Hadith) of the prophet Mohamed, Kayare said,

Such people are infidels. They are here to make us infidels, too; (email message, 03/09/2000)

Another response to Abey's email came from Ali Ahmed. Ali's intervention was more to do with defending Siyad Barre than admiring Abdiqasim (email message, 05/09/2000). He spoke about Siyad Barre's contributions to the Somali nation, such as the writing of the Somali language.

Comparing Somali writing with Swahili, Ali boasted Barre's success over Somali writing. Swahili language is spoken in many Eastern African countries. Beside Swahili, in each of these countries there are at least a dozen local languages and the only language they share is the English language.

Adopting a national orthography had been a thorny issue since the inception of the Somali Republic. Where the civilian government (1960-1969) failed to adopt Somali writing, in 1972 the military regime headed by Siyad Barre succeeded in adopting a new orthography. It used Latin characters.

At the end of the message, Ali acknowledges Siyad Barre as a dictator. However, he has faith in Siyad as a 'benevolent dictator', as he "could not achieve what he was to achieve for the Somali nation" (email message, 01/09/2000). Comparing him with dictators like Stalin, he believes Siyad Barre to have "transformed the Somali nation forever" with the introduction of Somali writing (*ibid.*).

"In spite of his totalitarianism, his tyrannous action was directed towards a noble achievement" (email message, 01/09/2000).

Ali's argument was challenged by Abdi Bodaaye. Referring to the long research on Somali writing, Abdi Bodaaye argued that the history of Somali writing goes back to more than two decades, before Siyad Barre's takeover in 1969 and that Siyad merely took advantage of this hard work. He added,

"Despite initial positive contribution by Siyad Barre, his regime began reversing the initial good initiative" (email message, 29/08/2000).

Bodaaye indicated that despite the good start, Siyad Barre and his military junta which later was named as the SRC, created the impression that the military government was more decisive than the civilian rulers had been. Party politics had disappointed and divided Somali society and the ineptitude of the civilian government had left the people disillusioned. Now there was a feeling that the army, which was apart from politics, had rescued the country and prevented it from plunging into turmoil [6].

Nevertheless, soon Siyad Barre introduced some sweeping legal and administrative reforms, by carrying out extensive social, political and economical programmes. Underlying the regime's extensive reforms was control of the people in the name of national security, and the consolidation of the power of SRC, and in particular of its chairman, General Siyad Barre. A dictatorial form of authority was in the making (*ibid.*). The people could not perceive this.

To shift the discussion to his advantage, in 2 November, Ali instigated a new debate by sending a new message entitled "Who led to the destruction of Somalia?" Listing all those who opposed the military regime of Siyad Barre in 1980 through 1990s, he assembled a list of people like Abdullahi Yusuf of the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), Ahmed Silaanyo of the Somali National Movement (SNM)

and Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal, who later became the first president of the Somaliland republic, Ahmed Omar Jees of Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM), and General Mohamed Farah Aideed of United Somali Congress (USC). The list also included Ali Mahdi Mohamed who was nominated as interim president on 29 January 1991 by the USC following Siyad Barre's ousting of Mogadishu. According to Ali, the armed resistance were responsible for the destruction of Somali state institutions as they allied with Ethiopia, which is considered to be "the arch-enemy of the Somali nation" (email message, 02/09/2000).

5.3 Member Groups

Generally, the debating groups could be divided into three groups: those in favour of the peace conference (and its outcome), the moderates and those against the conference. The moderates' messages were the most articulate. While they accepted the faults of the conference, they supported the Arta conference outcome. One worrisome fault was that of the representation of the conference. Both the moderates and contra groups criticised the representation.

The moderates' position could be viewed from two perspectives: the first from the complexity of the Somali crisis, and the second as 'a way out' or for 'the sake of a solution' from the Somali crisis (email message, 03/09/2000). While the latter view was more to do with 'despair' by 'conceding defeat' caused by a decade of civil strife, the first stemmed from the 'common sense' for a just solution to Somali problem. In other words, they both departed from a naive idea which made some groups glad to see things evolve with the motto, "a bad government is better than no government". They held that the notion that "it is better to have a minimum outcome than not having anything" (email message, 02/09/2000). They quoted this slogan, "What came out [from the conference] is a solution but not [necessarily] justice".

They argued that what had been agreed was just a temporary solution, therefore, we need tolerance and an atmosphere where Somalis could restart their lives (email message, 02/09/2000).

"Somalis cannot go on in this way for ever. They need a solution." (email message, 02/09/2000).

The moderated received less attention despite their articulated and respectful behaviour. Some members articulated their messages in a way to be viewed as pro-Arta outcome. They used to try to reconcile the two other groups by defusing the tension by reminding members of their status as educated people. However, it seemed that their attempt were in vain as they failed to narrow the gap between the two extreme groups. Many times, members were often reminded of their identity as 'intellectuals' asked to engage in 'academic' debate, one which is often defined as honest and unbiased.

As discussions covered all facets of Somalia's situation, sometimes debates were fierce and controversial. Every issue was quickly transformed by matching with the conflict at home.

In the SomaliForum, the exchanges were usually, hot, emotional and sometimes biased. They were outright seditious and troublesome; mostly personal attacks and hate mails were common. Initially, the mail was uncensored and unmoderated. Sometimes when the discussion went out of control and personal attack became a common event, the organisers decided to change the status of the list by making it censored.

At the end of September 2000, SomaliForum sent a short notice to its members warning that change of the feature of the facility. This is what is said,

“Members of this forum are bound by Somalihome Online's Terms of Use. Somali Open Forum is moderated which means messages are read before they are released to the forum. Any message that is out of line or simply nonsense will not be delivered. Members do not want their mail boxes to be filled with meaningless messages. Only sensible and constructive messages will be approved” .

The list also warned members that there will be some delays in receiving their messages as,

“It takes time to check every message sent to the forum and for that reason; there may be a short delay before messages appear in your mail boxes. It advised members to not send irrelevant messages. It pleaded members “to refrain from any offensive language against members of the forum or any other individual or group”

Additionally, it warned that everyone was entitled to their opinions but offensive language is something that is warned about.

“If you have a point to rise, please do so in a sensible and logical manner. The whole point of the forum is to benefit from one another through discussions. And remember, the respect you give should be the respect you receive. Be careful about private messages too, people don't want to waste their time on reading private messages. Thank you”.

6. ANALYSIS

Email may be the most important, unique method for communicating and developing relationships since the telephone. People also find it familiar and safe because it is similar in many respects to writing letters. Of all the methods for developing relationships on the internet, it is the most common - and perhaps the most powerful. In the case of Somali mailing lists, it was created with the intention to help the Diaspora shore up their support for the homeland peace talks.

The technology is not just electronic mail sent via the internet, but it creates a psychological space in which pairs

of groups of Somalis could interact. It has created a context and boundary in which human relationships can unfold.

The strong ties between groups became possible with the frequent contact (through electronic mails). Unlike face-to-face interaction, the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) offers opportunities for social interaction that do not depend on the distance between parties. Face-to-face interaction accompanies some important particularity, such as facial expression, vocal cues, body language, posture, gestures and non-verbal mannerism in general together with style of dress and hairstyle [2].

Somali community have a culture to keep in touch. Mailing technology made this cultural trend possible. Mailing technology allows people to write back and forth without having to spend much time worrying about how the message actually gets delivered. As technology grows closer and closer to being a common part of daily life, the need to understand the many ways it can be utilised and how it works, at least to some level, is vital [7].

Following the collapse of the Somali state in early 1991, the majority of educated Somalis left Somalia. In order to connect Somalis across the Diaspora to the solution and national development objectives, the Forum was to foster and promote the understanding and co-operation among the Somali Diaspora communities.

However, the discussions were subjective to the local political and social conflict which made Somalia to disappearance from the international scene in 1991 and make the episode a unique phenomenon in this nation-state era.

Despite that mailing list is a good tool for the task of reconciliation, the Forum failed to generate group feeling essential for any group to get together for a common need which required cooperation.

6.1 Vague Objectives

SomaliForum can be characterised as process-oriented despite that its cohesion was ‘Somaliness’ and that the means to that ambition was ‘for people to just communicate’, rather than to accomplish specific goals. This was aggravated by the notion of ‘Somaliness’ as the Somali nation was passing through its darkest time of history.

The period coincided with the rollback of the state frontiers as at this moment in time it was difficult to maintain a coherent view among members. It was impossible to avoid conflict of opinions which were always based on kinship. As the meaning of the text is 'contained' in the text and it must be 'extracted' by the 'reader', readers would apply to any meaning fit for their purpose. All discussions were charged with extreme political views. Sometimes, abusive mails were exchanged and members were expelled from the list.

Although the intention of communication was to enable people to create an atmosphere of understanding, the course of the debates seemed to never succeed in creating such a result. It was based on the principle of *Let us talk means let*

us reconcile". So people by communicating could come up with ways of solving their differences.

Many viewed the forum simply as a place for the armchair fighter. Armchair fighter is an allusion to people in villages and towns who waste their time in gossip and political debates.

6.2 Different Age groups

Maintaining a coherent view by many people who know each other virtually and hold opposing views was to be extremely problematic. SomaliForum was set on a difficult mission during a period of social conflict as this was extremely strenuous even in real life. The means created to solve a nation's tragedy was not enough to solve a problem of a national magnitude.

Groups are held together by common needs which require cooperation if these needs are to be satisfied. As what keeps the group together is shared values and objectives, one of the main reasons for the formation of the mailing list was to "create a means whereby the group could communicate outside their homeland" (email message, 12/07/2000). Besides the intimacy feeling, the Forum was also meant to create a sense of belonging among members. With this feeling, members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together [10].

As part of the sense of belonging, members were to identify with the group and feel a sense of buy-in to the group's purposes and values. Another effect of this feeling was supposed to be trust where members feel safe with group members generally acting for the good of the whole as members feel a moral imperative and desire to participate in activities and contribute to group goals.

Nevertheless, at the Forum members were poles apart in their views and interests as this depended on their clan at home. They were also from different backgrounds, professions and age. For example, there were doctors, engineers, merchants, and skilled and unskilled people, while there were also some politicians and students. No one could expect such varied people to agree on an issue, let alone when there is civil conflict.

The general rule was that members should engage and argue with whatever position they oppose and convince every one that their position is right until the other side backs down. Within a conflict environment, the position of an individual is not reasonable as his own, but the position of his social group or clan: The language used to reflect the conflict between the clans in Somalia. The debates used to get out of hand, since they mirrored the situation at home.

Intentionally, SomaliForum was meant to create an interactive online discussion that provoked and stimulated online discussion and sharing of viewpoints — an underpinning of classic conflict transformation. However, the free wheeling style backfired as it was not compatible with Somali situation. The participants were virtually influenced by the local events.

In an environment such as the one which followed the Somali civil strife of the early 1991, both mailing lists were expected to face difficulty of unity and aims. Beside the management, the fate of the list also depends on its aims and objectives. As the group's belief in the purpose, or goal of the group was shattered, there was no chance for the Forum to survive, as members could not cooperate.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has used as case study a discussion mailing list created in January 2000 by a group of the Somali Diaspora. The mailing list, known as Somali Open Forum, was formed to give its members an interactive online discussion that provoked and stimulated online discussion and sharing of viewpoints — an underpinning of classic conflict transformation. The purpose of communication was to create an atmosphere of understanding for its member to communicate and help solve conflict in their homeland. The new technology of the computer-mediated communication created an environment became where the Somali factional group, organise and communicate. In another way the mailing list medium has facilitated the some groups to take the Somali conflict outside the country. On the other hand, it is also where groups aiming as the supra-national level to meet and get together to help their folks at home. Whatever the objectives of the mailing groups, what influenced their discussions are mainly events at home.

The results of the research shows that despite that mailing list is a tool that can enable people to discuss and have an atmosphere of understanding, the depth of the social conflict in the homeland was too intense that participants were unable to come up with a joint opinion on how to help solve conflict at home.

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