

Rwanda's suppression of information dissemination

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Rwanda manages its image beyond its borders, to secure international support for its development and political stability. Suppressing the dissemination of critical information domestically and internationally is a key part of this strategy.

the media sector to be reformed and professionalised, however it remains tightly controlled by the authorities. This is in parts an understandable reaction to the role some of the media played before and during the genocide, however, the way control over information is organised leads to a high level of polarisation outside Rwanda, and fosters a climate of distrust of information both in the country and internationally.

Summary

This brief outlines some of the tactics Rwanda use to try control the dissemination of information, focusing mostly on how Rwanda operates beyond its borders. Rwanda leverages legislation that enables the censoring of media outlets and online website accessible within the country. To extend its control internationally, Rwanda has relied on discrediting critiques and using existing complaint mechanisms, of accusing critics of denying the genocide or supporting perpetrators. These efforts can take the form of coordinated online discreditation campaigns, sometimes using AI tools. These campaigns are not always coordinated by the State. They can also be launched by individuals or groups who have bought into the Rwanda's narrative.

Context

Rwanda remains marked by the genocide of 1994 and the 1990-94 civil war. Before and during the genocide, the media was tightly controlled by the regime and manipulated to reinforce hatred and violent attacks against the Tutsi and moderate Hutu.¹ Since then, Rwanda has been receiving development aid from the international community to reconstruct the country, representing 52 % of the central government expenses as of 2023. Reconstruction required

Key Messages

- Rwanda uses legal and regulatory frameworks to restrict media and online information access.
 - Critics are frequently discredited through accusations of genocide denial or support for perpetrators.
 - Discrediting campaigns operate through both state-linked actors and informal supporter networks.
- Complaint mechanisms and legal processes are used by the Rwandan state to indirectly suppress critical reporting.
 - Information control strategies increasingly extend beyond Rwanda's borders into international debates.
- These dynamics polarise discussions of the genocide and discourage independent research and media work.



The legal environment

Rwanda's media landscape is tightly controlled by a range of laws and regulations that allow the government to block information dissemination. They do so by closing outlets, blocking websites, monitoring and filtering publications and restricting access to digital platforms. Since Paul Kagame came to power, moderate estimates account for more than thirty suspended media. The Minister of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and Innovation has sweeping powers to interrupt or suspend any electronic communication services or providers without prior judicial authorisation, often on broad or unclear grounds. Similarly, the Media law sweeping limitations in the name of public order, morality and reputation. The Genocide Denial Law is also used to censor news outlets.²

Law governing information and communication technologies

- Media law
- Genocide Denial Law
- Law on data protection
- Law on interception of communications
- Law on Prevention and Punishment of Cyber Crimes
- Law Relating to Electronic Messages, Electronic Signatures and Electronic Transactions

Notably, censorship extends beyond domestic outlets. The BBC Kinyarwanda broadcast was banned from the country following the broadcasting of a documentary on the genocide on the BBC (in the United Kingdom), which Rwanda accused of denialism. In 2019, the Rwandan Senate accused 26 online radio stations and websites owned by Rwandan critics living in exile of genocide denial and the websites were made inaccessible. The respective authority (RURA) does not provide explanations or use transparent legal processes when blocking local and international news sites. Website owners also have no avenue of appeal.

In addition, all electronic communication services must obtain licenses, granted under broad and subjective criteria. As a result, licences of media outlets have often been revoked under unclear justifications, or intermediaries are pressured to over-censor content to avoid penalties or license loss.

Rwanda's broader regulatory framework places a heavy burden on ICT companies and compromises user privacy. Data protection and localisation laws allow the state to have access to personal information, fostering a climate of perceived surveillance over communications which reduces free expression. Providers should also comply with takedown requests without avenues of appeal. Content moderation obligations, combined with the laws against genocide ideology and cybercrimes, expand liability to intermediaries and encourages the over-removal of critical material.

Discrediting critics

The Rwandan state has limited the dissemination of information by organising or facilitating campaigns to discredit regime critics, including beyond its borders. This is done by frequently accusing critics of denying the genocide, or of being manipulated by genocide perpetrators. One example is the reaction to an academic book offering a critical analysis of Rwanda's reconstruction.

The book included contributions written by international scholars in a variety of disciplines, including from Rwanda. Ahead of its publication, the Rwandan regime organised a campaign to discredit its authors, [publishing a website](#) mostly made up of character assassinations.³ Many authors writing critically about Rwanda have faced similar discrediting campaigns, in Rwandan media or, more recently, online.

This type of campaign is not limited to academics. More recently, an international consortium of fifty journalists ("[Forbidden Stories](#)") released the results of their investigation into the "repressive machinery" of the Rwandan regime. The publication was met by a coordinated online campaign⁴, which relied on an existing network of accounts used in a campaign to promote a positive image of Rwanda internationally. This network used AI-generated images and messages to discredit the journalists behind the investigation, including by accusing them of genocide denial. It was followed by attempts to discredit the journalists, including by some academic specialists of the genocide in an open letter published in two Paris-based weekly newspapers.⁵ These focused on the fact that the investigation cites (among others) known genocide perpetrators and individuals who propagate negationist views, and for re-telling already known stories.

These two examples highlight how Rwanda accuses critics of denying the genocide against the Tutsi, and of perpetuating colonial paradigms of seeing Rwandans – and more broadly, Africans – as somehow inferior and needing to be saved.

Using existing complaint mechanisms

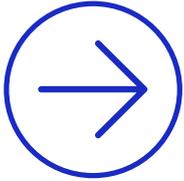
While the examples above show how the internet, social media, and expert networks can be used to discredit critics, a second tactic involves using existing complaint mechanisms or judicial processes to suppress the dissemination of information.

The case of the BBC documentary mentioned above is the most famous example. 38 journalists and academics sent [letters of complaint](#) to the BBC, and to its Editorial Complaint Unit. Both the Unit and the BBC Trust concluded that the documentary did not deny the genocide⁶, but this is still an example of indirect suppression: the BBC's complaint mechanism was mobilised by individuals supporting the regime – not by the regime itself.

Two court cases filed in France for contesting the existence of a crime against humanity in Rwanda highlight the difficulty in discerning between potential suppression efforts and real cases of genocide denial. In the first, a journalist was sued for criticising the current regime for "its crimes before, during, and after the genocide"⁷ during a radio debate. The lawsuit was filed by three civil society organisations, two of which are closely aligned with Rwanda: Ibuka France, an organisation supporting victims of the genocide, and the Communauté Rwandaise de France ("the Rwandan Community in France"). The journalist was found not guilty as she had also reaffirmed the existence of the genocide.⁸ The other case was filed against writer and political scientist Charles Onana by three different organisations: the Human Rights League, the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues and Survie. Here, the court condemned the writer for book excerpts describing the genocide as "a conspiracy theory".⁹ The decision has been appealed.

These cases highlight the complexity such legal actions. Two organisations aligned with the current regime in Rwanda filed the complaint in the first case. They also targeted small parts of the speech, which can be interpreted as an attempt to control the narrative about the Rwandan regime. The second case was clearer, and the courts managed to differentiate between the two. The FIDH, one of the organisations filing the second lawsuit, faced criticism for filing the lawsuit. They emphasised in [a press release](#) that they criticise both genocide denial and the human rights violations conducted by the regime in Rwanda.

Discrediting campaigns that accuse critics of supporting genocide perpetrators or denying the genocide have led to an extremely polarised public sphere when discussing Rwanda. This fosters a climate of distrust on any information about Rwanda, and particularly towards those who oppose the current regime. This is particularly damaging as it also provides arguments to those who really participated in the genocide or deny its existence, whose first line of defence is often that they are being persecuted for their political opinion.



Policy recommendations

- **Support the development** of an independent and professional media sector in Rwanda by providing legal and technical support;
- **Develop the awareness** of European stakeholders (policymakers, the media, human rights defenders) around the campaigns that are deployed against regime critics beyond Rwanda's borders;
- **Combat the instrumentalisation of safeguard mechanisms** by ensuring the transparency of decision processes.
- **Support a wide range of human rights defending civil society organisations** in Rwanda and internationally.

Notes:

- ¹ Straus, S. (2007). What Is the Relationship between Hate Radio and Violence? Rethinking Rwanda's "Radio Machete." *Politics & Society*, 35(4), 609–637; Mironko, C. (2007). The Effect of RTLM's Rhetoric of Ethnic Hatred in Rural Rwanda. In A. Thompson (Ed.), *The Media & the Rwanda Genocide* (pp. 125–135). Pluto Press.
- ² For more on this piece of legislation, see the policy brief on Rwanda's suppression of information production, and the working paper.
- ³ Dukalskis, Alexander. 2021. *Making the World Safe for Dictatorship*. (p147) Oxford University Press.
- ⁴ Wack, Morgan, Darren Linvill, and Patrick Warren. 2024. Old Despots, New Tricks - An AI-Empowered Pro-Kagame/RPF Coordinated Influence Network on X. No. 5. Media Forensics Hub Reports. open.clemson.edu/mfh_reports/5/.
- ⁵ See (in French) an open letter reproduced in the France-based weeklies *Le Point* and *Jeune Afrique* www.jeuneafrique.com/1573888/politique/rwanda-classified-une-enquete-a-charge/. For the rebuttal by one of the members of the consortium see Groenink, Evelyn. 2024. 'Denying a Genocide by Investigating a Car Accident'. *ZAM*, June 19. www.zammagazine.com/investigations/1816-denying-a-genocide-by-investigating-a-car-accident
- ⁷ AFP. (2022, March 1). A la barre, Natacha Polony se défend d'avoir nié le génocide au Rwanda.
- ⁸ AFP 2022, La journaliste Natacha Polony relaxée d'une accusation de contestation du génocide au Rwanda.
- ⁹ Libération & AFP. 2024, December 9. Génocide des Tutsis au Rwanda: L'auteur franco-camerounais Charles Onana condamné à une amende pour négationnisme. *Libération*.

Disclaimer

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About the ARM Project

Coordinated by the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), the ARM project delves into authoritarian strategies for information control beyond borders. While foreign disinformation receives ample scrutiny, other forms of foreign information manipulation and intervention (FIMI) remain overlooked.

Analysing Russia, China, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, ARM conceptualises and addresses different forms of FIMI. The project will explore the extent that major global players like China and Russia, alongside Ethiopia and Rwanda, engage in transnational information suppression, particularly targeting European diaspora communities.

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