ARM

Rwanda's suppression of information production

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In 2019, the Rwandan Office of the President quoted Paul Kagame on (then) Twitter, stating that online critics in "America, South Africa or France" are "far from the fire", but that the day they "are close to the fire, it will burn them." In this brief, we broadly explore how the production of critical information about Rwanda is suppressed.

reconstruct the country, representing 52 % of the central government expenses as of 2023. Today, domestic and foreign journalists, activists, and academics navigate restrictive legislation, surveillance, and threats from the state. This has consequences on the type of questions they can ask, the topics they can cover, and the information that can reach the public in Rwanda and beyond.

Summary

Rwanda tightly controls the production of information to suppress critical voices. A restrictive legal environment is leveraged to limit access and to monitor the activities of journalists, researchers, and activists – both Rwandans and foreigners. The aim is twofold: domestically, the regime deploys these strategies in order to remain in power. Externally, it is to gain the support and acceptance of the international community, thereby limiting external pressures to respect human rights and guaranteeing its survival.

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

Key Messages

- Rwanda carefully maintains its image as an example of resilience and development following the 1994 genocide

- Legislation on genocide denial, cybercrime and the media disproportionately restricts freedom of speech

- Visas, research permits and ethics reviews are instrumentalised to limit access to researchers and journalists

- Access to official data (surveys, census, other statistics) is limited

- Rwanda deploys surveillance techniques towards journalists and researchers in the country and online

- These tactics affect the type information that can be produced about the country

The legal environment

Rwanda's restrictive legislation severely restricts the production of information. Many restrictions come from the Penal Code, which criminalises a wide range of speech-related acts. These include spreading "false information or harmful propaganda with intent to cause a hostile international opinion against Rwanda", acts likely to prejudice or distinguish a person or group of persons on the basis of a defined list of characteristics; the offence of 'public insult'; and speech perceived as undermining the ruling authorities or the President. All those laws are easily weaponised against critics because they are vaguely worded. These laws lack the clarity, precision, proportionality and necessity that human rights law imposes on restrictions to free speech.

Legislation on sectarianism and genocide ideology is also used to restrict information production. The former prohibit broadly "any use of speech, writings, or any other act that divides people and which may spark conflicts, or which may cause strife among the people based on discrimination." The latter, is justified by the government by comparing it to similar Holocaust denial legislation. However, it lacks the accompanying safeguards and guarantees that usually constrain such legislation.

Laws restricting information production in Rwanda

- **Penal Code**
  - → **Offence of "sectarianism" or "divisionism"**
- **Antiterrorism framework**
- **Cybercrime law**
- **Genocide denial law**
- **Media law**

Both laws lack clarity and precision. They cover a broad range of actions, without requiring any imminent risk and do not pass the test of necessity or proportionality, as usually happens with restrictions to freedom of speech. Authorities often apply them broadly mainly as an intimidation practice where, instead of serving legality, the laws reinforce state power by instrumentalising Rwanda's ethnic history. While they are framed as tools for national unity, they are applied selectively to silence dissent, rather than to prevent conflict.

Authorities also bring charges under national security and combat digital crime legislation, alongside the strict regulation of online media through the Media Law. References to Rwanda's past are again used to justify broad media restrictions in the name of safeguarding public order, good morals, reputation, and private life. Citizens, youtubers, bloggers, journalists and politicians have been charged with a rich set of offences that criminalise free speech, in what Human rights Watch called a 'wave of free speech prosecutions.' Legal pressure is often combined with extra-legal methods to silence critics, ranging from murders and harassment to arbitrary arrests and surveillance.

Limiting access

Beyond legislation, Rwanda uses various techniques to limit access both to the country and to forms of data needed for independent reporting or research. One key method is limiting access to foreign journalists, civil society organisations, or academics. Bureaucratic systems are used

to control the objectives of researchers, journalists or investigators, and to filter applicants by favouring those who appear aligned with the image the country aims to project.

Rwanda has become notoriously difficult to access for research. In addition to securing their visa, academic researchers are required to secure approval from Rwanda's national ethics committee, as well as get a research permit and to partner with a local organisation.[2] These procedures are not unique to Rwanda, they are also applied in neighbouring Uganda, as well as by European countries for non-EU residents. However these procedures are often unclear in Rwanda and are often used to limit what questions can be asked and what information can be accessed.[3] Researchers report experiencing moving targets, such being asked to document support from additional partners in the process of securing ethics approval, often with tight deadlines.

The result can be that researchers choose other countries to study in order to stay within time schedules, while journalists may choose to focus on topics that are not controversial. Even if researchers, journalists, or civil society activists manage to cross these hurdles, controls at the borders are still used to restrict access. Academics are told their visa is invalid when arriving, or Human Rights Watch researchers are denied entry[4], in both cases following the publication of critical reports.

Access to data is also limited. The country's Access to Information law allows the authorities to refuse disclosure of information that might be politically sensitive or embarrassing, under the exemption for information that could 'destabilise national security' or 'impede enforcement of law or justice', without clear limits.[5] This results in only a very small number of positive responses to access requests.

Researchers also report difficulties in accessing data from opinion surveys.[6] Others have questioned the quality of data about Rwanda that the government produces and transfers to international institutions such as the World Bank. The quality of data on poverty has also been questioned by several researchers[7], with some identifying issues that seem to indicate that statistical data has been manipulated to paint an overly positive picture of the development of the country.

Monitoring activities

Rwanda is also known for closely monitoring the activities of journalists, researchers and activists. Fixers, partner organisations, and even Rwanda's national ethics committee are instrumentalised for surveillance. French television journalists have shown how their fixer – a local journalist – was required to report their plans to the government's speaker daily, and was required to adjust them, reorienting their work. They also show how their interlocutors are pressured to give specific answers.

Academics are regularly asked by partner organisations or government representatives to provide the list of individuals they have interviewed or to show their notes.[8] Others report that the national ethics committee sometimes require complete research notes or interview recordings. These requests go against fundamental principles of scientific and journalistsic ethics if interviewees have asked to be anonymised.

Rwanda is also known for monitoring private communication via spyware such as NSO's Pegasus, which is used to surveill journalists, activists and politicians domestically as well as in South Africa and Belgium.[9] Other types of spyware appear to have been used for similar pruposes, even as Rwanda ceased to have access to Pegasus in 2021.

Rwanda has a track record of threatening those who produce information and knowledge based on findings from state surveillance. Some have been sent to "re-education programmes" while their passport was withheld[10] or deported from the country[11], or more simply the state denied new visas and research permits to those whose results were not in line with the image Rwandan authorities want to project.
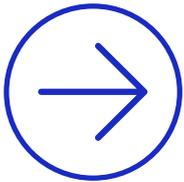
Policy recommendations

Producing independent information about Rwanda has become extremely difficult for domestic actors, as well as external journalists, academics, and human rights activists . The level of restrictions of information production in Rwanda is so high that it affects the questions that can be asked. The kind of information that circulates about Rwanda is likely affected, and it becomes difficult to know what is hidden.

In order to support the production of independent information about Rwanda, the EU and its member states should:

1. **Engage with Rwanda on the state of freedom of expression** and right to alternative information, including the need to better align its legislation with the core Human Rights conventions.

2. **Support the production of independent information** in Rwanda by providing protection for journalists and researchers in the country (asylum pathways for Rwandan citizens, consular support for others).

3. **Remain aware of the conditions** under which information and data in and about Rwanda are produced when using them in the development of policies towards Rwanda.

4. **Support efforts to audit and enhance the quality** of statistical data provided by Rwanda to international institutions such as the World Bank.

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 Jessee, Erin. 2012. 'Conducting Fieldwork in Rwanda'. Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue Canadienne d'études Du Développement 33 (2): 266–74.

3 Loyle, Cyanne E. 2016. 'Overcoming Research Obstacles in Hybrid Regimes: Lessons from Rwanda'. Social Science Quarterly 97 (4): 923–35..

4 Human Rights Watch. (2025, July). Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Rwanda 51st Session. https://uprdoc.ohchr.org/uprweb/downloadfile.aspx?filename=15184&file=EnglishTranslation

5 Never Again Rwanda & Citizen Rights and Development. (2025, July 17). Republic of Rwanda Joint Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review Fourth Cycle of the UPR Working Group. https://uprdoc. ohchr.org/uprweb/downloadfile.aspx?filename=15144&file=EnglishTranslation

6 Loyle (2016). 'Overcoming Research Obstacles in Hybrid Regimes'.

7 Ansoms, An, Esther Marijnen, Giuseppe Cioffo, and Jude Murison. 2017. 'Statistics versus Livelihoods: Questioning Rwanda's Pathway out of Poverty'. Review of African Political Economy 44 (151): 47–65.

8 Thomson, Susan. 2009. '"That Is Not What We Authorised You to Do … ": Access and Government Interference in Highly Politicised Research Environments'. In Surviving Field Research: Working in Violent and Difficult Situations, edited by Chandra Lekha Sriram. Routledge.

9 European Parliament. (2023, July 15). Investigation of the use of Pegasus and equivalent surveillance spyware (Recommendation). www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0244_EN.pdf;

10 Thomson, Susan. 2011. 'Reeducation for Reconciliation: Participant Observations on Ingando'. In Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Violence, edited by Scott Straus and Lars Waldorf. Critical Human Rights. The University of Wisconsin Press.

11 Nicaise, Guillaume. 2021. La bonne gouvernance au Rwanda et au Burundi: Petites réformes et grands arrangements. Editions L'Harmattan.

12 See for exemple reports by Reporters without Borders, Human Rights Watch, or Freedom House, as well as the stakeholders' submissions to the United Nation' Human Rights Council for the for the Universal Periodic Review of Rwanda (fourth cycle) available at www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/rw-stakeholders-info-s51

Disclaimer

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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