ARM

Rwanda's architecture of information suppression

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How do state actors engineer a digital world where critical voices are silenced, and state narratives dominate? Such processes of managing and manipulating information salience are central to FIMI (foreign information manipulations and interference), and recognising salience management as a core mechanism of information control is therefore essential for policymakers, platforms, and researchers.

Summary

This brief analyses Rwanda's state-driven information operations to manage information salience and suppress dissent online. Drawing on social media data analysis and qualitative evidence, it shows how information control extends beyond overt censorship to the strategic management of visibility – shaping which topics dominate public discourse.

Online environments are dominated by pro-government networks which marginalise human rights and critical voices through a combination of persuasive and coercive practices. Persuasion operates primarily through reputation management strategies – such as "sportswashing," celebratory narratives of national progress, and the amplification of pro-regime content – that flood digital spaces and shape what becomes salient. Coercive elements appear more selectively, including targeted harassment, coordinated discrediting of opponents, and intimidation, which all raise the perceived cost of dissent. The increasing use of AI-driven influence operations – such as automated amplification, synthetic accounts, and generative media – further strengthens these tactics, producing an artificial appearance of consensus and muting grassroots testimonies of human rights abuses.

Key Messages

- Rwanda's information control prioritises salience management over censorship

- National pride and progress narratives pre-empt and neutralise critical scrutiny

- Coordinated pro-government networks flood platforms to amplify regime narratives

- Pro-government networks are boosted by users who are not under the direct control of the government but want to prove their support and loyalty online

- Dissent is delegitimised as genocide denial or foreign, colonial manipulation

- Visuals, memes, and humour systematically replace debate and delegitimise opponents

- AI-enabled amplification intensifies harassment and narrative dominance

- Critical voices remain present but are displaced through engineered attention dynamics

Context

Rwanda projects itself as a model of development and a hub of regional stability. Yet this image is sustained by a structured system of narrative management and information suppression, extending beyond domestic audiences to include cross-border pressure on critics in the diaspora. Online platforms have become a key battleground where the "Twitter/X army" works to shape global perceptions.

These are institutionalised strategies where salience is carefully manufactured. Posts highlighting sports, tourism, modernity, and presidential leadership circulate widely, often boosted by users who are not formally directed by the state but acti pre-emptively to signal loyalty or avoid reprisals. In contrast, accounts documenting human rights abuses or regional military involvement struggle to gain sustained visibility. For EU and international policymakers, this produces a distorted field of perception that complicates conflict analysis and policy response.

Projecting Rwanda's progress and prosperity

Rwanda's government has invested heavily in presenting a global image of success, modernity, and resilience. This project extends far beyond traditional diplomacy. This is not merely reputational branding but a salience strategy: ensuring that particular narratives – economic growth, efficient governance, regional leadership, and national unity dominate public attention while alternative interpretations struggle to gain visibility.

Sponsorships with Arsenal FC, Bayern Munich, and the Basketball Africa League are not simply commercial deals but symbolic instruments of sportswashing, linking Rwanda to global excellence while redirecting attention away from repression, dissent, and regional military involvement. These partnerships do not silence critics directly; but they pre-empt them by occupying attention in advance, and by shaping what international audiences come to recognise as "the Rwanda story."

National pride plays a crucial, affective role in this strategy. Progress and stability are framed as collective achievements, enabling criticism to be reframed as hostility, disloyalty, or "anti-Rwandan" sentiment. Salience thus operates pre-emptively, narrowing the discursive space available for dissent before critique even emerges.

Digital narrative salience in online spaces

Online platforms – particularly X (formerly Twitter) – are central to sustaining this image. Across Rwanda's digital environment, control over information is not incidental – it is strategic, structured, and relational. The online environment is dominated by pro-government voices that work to amplify the Rwandan Patriotic Front's (RPF) preferred image while marginalising critical perspectives.

Figure 1. A snapshot from TikTok video that presents Kagame as a hero *Illustration by author.*

Rather than relying on outright censorship, the regime manages attention through algorithmic visibility – influencing which narratives circulate widely and which remain peripheral. Evidence from social media data shows that during key events (such as the release of *Forbidden stories: Rwanda Classified*[1] in May 2024, a small minority of highly active accounts generate a disproportionate share of content, a pattern characteristic of coordinated amplification networks. This "flooding" effect ensures that regime-friendly narratives dominate feeds and search results, while dissenting perspectives are pushed to the margins through ridicule, displacement, and delegitimisation.[2]

Visual loyalty, humour, and affective amplification

Pro-regime accounts consistently curate profiles and content that signal loyalty, discipline, and national pride. Common visual motifs include images of President Kagame, military inspections, Kigali's modern skyline, and idealised representations of Rwandan tradition – long-horned cattle, ceremonial dancers, and royal imagery. These visuals perform belonging, reinforcing narratives of progress, order, and cultural authenticity.

Memes and humour play a crucial role in lowering participation costs and sustaining engagement. Ridicule replaces argumentation: political opponents are portrayed as primitive, corrupt, or ridiculous, while foreign critics are infantilised or depicted as hypocritical. Humour functions as a governance tool, sustaining engagement while discouraging deliberation and reframing political conflict as entertainment rather than accountability.

Digital harassment, discrediting, and hybrid human–AI practices

Alongside positive branding, critics and opposition figures are targeted through coordinated harassment and discrediting campaigns, relying on intimidation, misinformation and hybrid human–AI techniques. Manipulated or AI-generated images portray critics as foreign agents, rebels, or morally suspect individuals. Activists such as Victoire Ingabire have been falsely linked to insurgent groups, while Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi has been mocked and delegitimized through synthetic media.

Synthetic media – AI-generated or AI-modified text, images, video, or audio – intensifies these dynamics, enabling rapid, scalable amplification while blurring attribution. Ridicule replaces argumentation. These tactics align with what *Human Rights Watch* (2024)[3] describes as "transnational repression", where digital attacks are paired with offline surveillance and intimidation, even against Rwandans in exile.

Key techniques include:
- **AI-generated text:** automated posts created at scale to overwhelm individual posts and hence prevent genuine discussion.

- **Synthetic Media:** AI-produced or altered images and videos used to mislead or ridicule

- **Astroturfing:** fake grassroots support coordinated to appear spontaneous and popular such as hashtags like #ThanksPK or #RPFOnTop. Astroturfing is the deceptive practice of hiding the sponsors of an orchestrated message or organization to make it appear as though it originates from, and is supported by, unsolicited grassroots participants.

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[1] forbiddenstories.org/rwanda-classified-inside-the-repressive-machinery-of-paul-kagames-regime/
[2] Wack, M., Linvill, D. and Warren, P., 2024. Old Despots, New Tricks-An AI-Empowered Pro-Kagame/RPF Coordinated Influence Network on X.
[3] www.hrw.org/report/2023/10/10/join-us-or-die/rwandas-extraterritorial-repression

- **Trivialising:** using humour and memes (for example, #mainaandkingangi) to make serious political issues seem unimportant.
- **Oversimplification:** Reducing complex conflicts to binary and misleading "good versus evil" narratives.
- **Reframing: portraying critics as threats** (e.g. foreign agents or genocide deniers) to delegitimise their claims.[4]

Example: Salience Management through a campaign on X (Former Twitter) after the M23 invasion of Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo

In January 2025, following the m23 invasion of Goma, a coordinated campaign emerged on X. Although the Rwandan government officially denied involvement, supportive profiles openly celebrated the advance of the rebels. They rapidly converged on a shared narrative that framed the offensive as legitimate and supported by the local population. Within days, highly repetitive visual content circulated in waves: first images portraying civilians greeting M23 fighters, then posts highlighting alleged European mercenaries being disarmed (Figure 3), followed by sensational and disturbing videos accusing Congolese militias of extreme violence. Each wave dominated attention for short periods, crowding out alternative interpretations. Critical commentary was consistently dismissed as "genocidal ideology" or Western manipulation.

South African, Congolese, and European leaders were mocked through memes and caricatures. Although opposition figures attempted visual counter-narratives, these circulated far less widely, demonstrating how coordinated amplification—not censorship—shaped visibility and suppressed dissent in the aftermath of the Goma offensive.

Figure 2. An images of 'white mercenaries' being disarmed by M23 in Goma, circulated for a few days around the end of January 2025.

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[4] www.hrw.org/report/2023/10/10/join-us-or-die/rwandas-extraterritorial-repression

Governing visibility: Beyond censorship

Rwanda's digital environment demonstrates how modern authoritarianism has adapted to the age of social media. Rather than simply blocking websites, it manages visibility – deciding what rises, what trends, what fades, and what appears marginal or illegitimate. This form of control is more insidious and resilient than outright censorship because it operates through the very mechanisms of online engagement: algorithms, volume, and virality.

For diaspora communities, this translates into fear, silence, and self-censorship reinforced by harassment and the threat of offline repercussions. For international observers, Rwanda's polished digital image – amplified by sports diplomacy and innovation narrative – obscures underlying dynamics of repression.

Addressing this challenge requires more focus and a shift in how digital repression is understood. It is not only about misinformation or propaganda, but about salience management – the ability to decide what is worthy of attention. Policymakers should treat this as a measurable indicator of democratic health. Diplomatic and development partnerships with Rwanda must be conditioned on tangible improvements in digital rights, online safety, and the cessation of transnational digital harassment, not successful image projection.
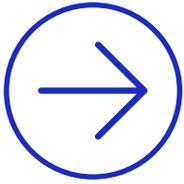
Policy Recommendations

- **Strengthen alliances** for factchecking and counter-disinformation, and actively amplify suppressed voices through coordinated campaigns and partnerships.

- **Integrate narrative monitoring** into conflict analysis and foreign policy decision-making, alongside traditional security and governance indicators.

- **Widen information-gathering** beyond dominant Anglophone media, actively incorporating Francophone and grassroots sources for more balanced policy assessments.

- **Provide direct digital security tools, legal support, and visibility platforms** to independent media, exiled journalists, local NGOs, and diaspora voices. .

- **Engage with social media platforms** to improve detection of AI-generated content, coordinated inauthentic "flooding" behaviour, and hashtag manipulation.

- **Condition diplomatic and development partnerships** on measurable improvements in digital rights, protection from online harassment and surveillance, and cessation of transnational digital repression.

- **Support research** into the social impacts of long-term exposure to state-controlled information environments, including self-censorship, political participation, and diaspora engagement.

- **Establish clear protocols** within EU member states to investigate and respond to threats, harassment, and surveillance targeting the Rwandan diaspora from transnational repression.

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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