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Information Suppression in Rwanda

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1. Introduction

Rwanda presents a highly efficient model of information control, in which the diaspora functions as an extension of domestic control, operating both online and offline. This case is directly relevant for EU policy debates because it illustrates how narrative discipline, the strategic mobilisation of legitimacy, and the instrumentalisation of memory can shape public discourse and silence critical stakeholders. These dynamics have concrete implications for EU engagement in the Great Lakes region, as well as for academic freedom and the protection of information integrity within Europe.

Rwanda is often portrayed as a model of development and stability in Africa, and international donors including EU member states have been eager to engage in rebuilding the country after the 1994 genocide (see box 1). However, growing concerns have been raised by academics, journalists and human rights organisations about authoritarian tendencies in the country. Multiple reports indicate **significant constraints** on information access and circulation. This has repercussions for freedom of expression, restricting the political arena inside the country.

It also has repercussions in the EU where NGOs, thinktanks, national and European politicians and even national justice systems may be influenced by Rwandan interest groups. This is possible because foreign journalists, lawyers, and academics face obstacles in accessing information in Rwanda (see section 3.2 in this report) while independent but aligned individuals amplify government-consistent narratives (see sections 5 and 6.1). Analyses of online activity suggest that government-aligned accounts shape online discourse, while critical voices receive comparatively limited visibility (see section 5). Finally, our findings describe how Rwandan government maintains extensive state engagement with diaspora networks over a significant part of its diaspora. Members of the diaspora work hard to support the government-aligned perspectives with European NGOs, human rights organisations, parliamentarians, academics and courts.

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference[1] (FIMI) has attracted increased attention in European policy circles, due to the perceived threat from China and Russia. This report seeks to add nuance to these debates and draw attention to smaller actors who might not be a massive threat towards European security, but who nevertheless manipulate and suppress

[1] FIMI consisists in “mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processed.Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner, by state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory”. EU External Action Service (EEAS). 2023. *1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats. Towards a Framework for Networked Defence*. p4.

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information to obtain specific political goals. Whereas some governments are commonly classified as authoritarian in political-science literature, Rwanda presents a distinct case in which the state actively promotes an international image of progress, development, and openness. This means that the tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) of information suppression are subtle and sophisticated.

We define information suppression as "a set of actions to silence information with the purpose of muting dissenting voices or narratives within and outside a country's borders, serving the interest of strengthening a regime's grip on power"[2].

In order to identify the TTPs deployed by Rwanda, we focus the on three levels of information conditions under which journalists, academics or human rights activists are able to work:

- Information production: the conditions under which journalists, academics, and human rights actors are able to conduct research and reporting.
- Information dissemination:the mechanisms through which information is circulated or restricted in public space.
- Information salience: The processes through which certain narratives gain visibility and prominence while others are marginalised.

At the level of **information production**, Rwandan laws that are allegedly in place to prevent genocide and divisionism and ensure political stability, are reported to have the effect of limiting political opposition and prevent domestic and international scholars and journalists from accessing certain information.

The Rwandan state also exercises control over **information dissemination** within its borders and beyond. To do so, the state leverages its legislation, which facilitates censoring media outlets and online websites accessible in the country. Note that, as opposed to many authoritarian regimes, the Rwandan government has never closed down access to large parts of the internet (as is the case in China), nor has it shut down mobile networks (as its neighbours Tanzania did shortly after its 2025 elections and Uganda did in relation to its 2026 elections). To extend its control beyond borders, Rwanda has relied on discrediting critiques and using existing complaint mechanisms, usually accusing critiques of denying the genocide or supporting perpetrators.

[2] See the first project's policy brief, "Information Suppression", 2024 available at https://www.arm-project.eu/publication/information-suppression/ .

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Much information suppression takes place through **controlling information salience**. Instead of shutting down internet access, the regime employs more subtle tactics and techniques of controlling information through salience; making some narratives more visible through 'flooding' while 'drowning' other narratives. These tactics and techniques increasingly take place on social media platforms like TikTok, X, Facebook and Youtube. This working paper explores how clusters of accounts on X appear to engage in coordinated posting patterns overwhelming dissent through volume rather than argument. Diaspora critics and journalists face online intimidation, while opposition voices are marginalised.

Evidence suggests a recurrent and structured pattern where salience is carefully manufactured, rather than isolated incidents. The flooding is amplified by individuals who are not under direct orders from the state, but who voluntarily share content that is aligned with government narratives, for diverse personal reasons. Narratives about sports, tourism, efficiency, Kagame's leadership, and Rwanda's global partnerships are amplified; while critical accounts of human rights abuses, lack of political freedom, or military interference in neighbouring countries are discredited and drowned out. Additionnally, this likely affects the ability and motivations of those who are targeted to continue producing and disseminating information critical of the regime. For policymakers in the EU and beyond, this produces a distorted field of perception—one that privileges regime narratives at the expense of comprehensive conflict analysis.

The Rwandan regime also leverages the control it exercises over its diaspora in order to suppress information. The Rwandan diaspora in Europe is deeply divided. Pro-regime members of the diaspora are instrumental in promoting a glossy image, controlling what information is being spread and influencing European policy makers, journalists, academics and lawyers. Others, particularly critics, face intimidation, harassment, and exclusion. These dynamics transform diaspora politics into a tool of foreign information manipulation and repression within Europe. It has direct implications for EU policy, touching on foreign interference, disinformation, protection of civic space, and EU external engagement with the Great Lakes region, including the South Kivu conflict.

To contextualise current information-politics dynamics, Box 1 presents how the 1994 genocide and its aftermath continue to shape Rwanda's political narratives and state behaviour.

Box 1: the Rwandan genocide and its repercussions

The 1994 genocide, that cost an estimated 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu lives, was carefully planned and orchestrated by Hutu extremists within the Rwandan government at

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the time. The question of ethnicity in Rwanda is highly contentious and politicised. However, it is widely agreed that German and Belgian rule exacerbated the differences between the Hutu and Tutsi, and that it became politicised through the 1959 'Hutu revolution' and the first republics after independence. Many Tutsi chose to leave the country from 1959 onwards, and these Tutsi would later make up the core of the rebel movement, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). The RPF ended the genocide while the international community failed to intervene. The RPF, led by former general Paul Kagame, is still in power, and is adamant to prevent genocide from happening again. The government's focus on national security, national unity and fighting genocide ideology, negationism and divisionism is important for understanding the need to control and suppress information, domestically and internationally. It also helps us understand how Rwandan government critics are dismissed as 'genocidaires'.

International observers who criticise the regime are accused of neo-colonialism, based on Belgium's divide and rule and on the international community's failure to intervene in the genocide.

KEY POINTS:

- The Rwandan government uses laws on genocide and divisionism to suppress information production and dissemination.
- The genocide and the perceived need for security, stability and national unity is used more broadly to stifle opposition and free information flows.
- Twitter armies flood X and other platforms with positive accounts about the president, Rwandan traditions, economic progress and sports events to flood these platforms with positive and non-political narratives.
- Critical voices are discredited as genocide supporters or colonialists.
- Diaspora communities appear strongly polarised. One is targeted by the regime, harassed and threatened in their host country and their families threatened in the home country. The other works closely with the regime to control the critical diaspora and to lobby relevant actors in host societies.
- While the campaigns are coordinated by the government in Kigali, many of the actors supporting the regime do so on their own accord.

Figure 1 illustrates the structure of the paper by conceptualising information suppression in Rwanda as a system that manages visibility in addition to restricting access. We proceed

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sequentially, examining how legal and institutional controls shape information production, how constrain mechanisms are applied to constrain dissemination, and how salience management determines which narratives dominate public attention.

The final section shows how control mechanisms are also deployed through diaspora networks, relying on moral framing, social sanctions, and agenda-setting to extend information suppression.

Together, the four sections show how information control interventions target different levels (production, dissemination, and salience) and involve different actors (journalists, academics, diaspora members).

While the diagram below represents the flow of the paper, as well as the cascading effects of interventions (for example restrictions on the production of information limit further dissemination and salience), it does not include feedback loops.

Manipulating salience or suppressing the dissemination also has a deterring effect and is likely to demotivate those who would want to produce new information.

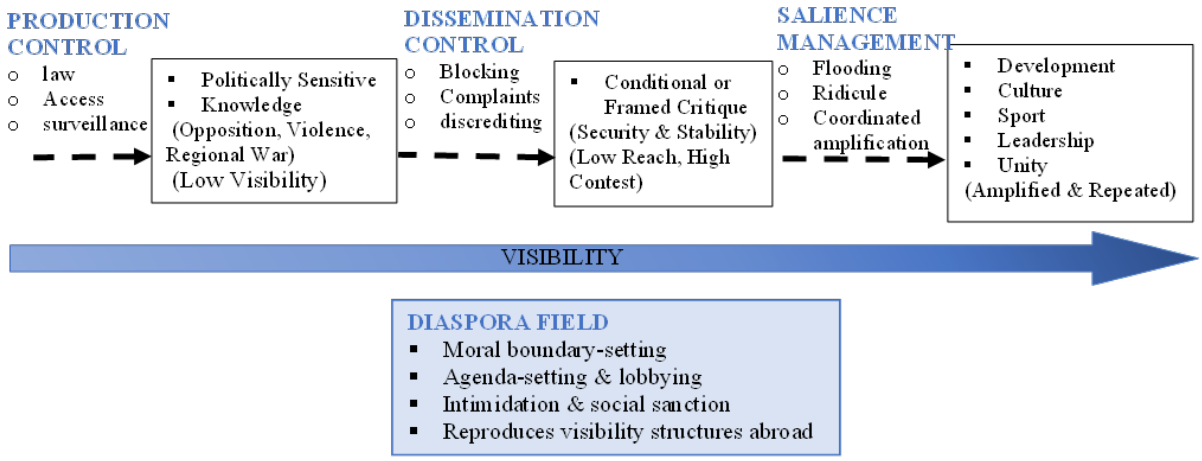

Figure 1: Structure visibility in Rwanda's information suppression

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2. Methodological approach

In order to identify the extent to which information critical of Rwanda is suppressed, we have adopted a mixed-methods approach. This allows us to adjust to the specific characteristics of each level of the information cycle we focus on, as well as the diaspora.

In our investigation of information production and dissemination, we have reviewed existing legislation in Rwanda as well as grey literature on how Rwanda implements the Human Rights Conventions it is a party to. We have also reviewed scholarly literature focused on freedom of expression and information in Rwanda and on the role of the media more generally, as well as descriptions of the ethical and methodological challenges scholars researching Rwanda have encountered. We supplemented this material with journalistic accounts.

To analyse salience, we combine two complementary approaches: (1) digital ethnography based on sustained observation of pro-regime and critical accounts during politically salient moments in early 2025; and (2) social network analysis (SNA) of interaction networks on X (formerly Twitter), focusing on retweets, replies, mentions, and quote tweets.

This mixed-methods design allows us to link network structure (who amplifies whom), content dynamics (what circulates and how), and meaning-making practices (how narratives are framed[3], inhabited, and legitimised by participants). Ethnography captures the affective, aesthetic, and performative dimensions of online political engagement, while SNA reveals the patterns of activity (e.g. who is connected to who in a network, who is more marginal and central to a network) that shape visibility, amplification, and information salience at scale. Together, these approaches enable analysis of information suppression not as direct censorship, but as salience management—the strategic privileging of some narratives over others within algorithmically mediated attention economies[4]. To demonstrate the reach and potency of Rwanda's salience management ecosystem, we focus on key 'media events':[5] Forbidden stories' "Rwanda Classified" investigation and its reception in 2024, the Rwandan

[3] Entman, R.M., 1993. Framing: Towards clarification of a fractured paradigm. McQuail's reader in mass communication theory, 390, p.397.
[4] Gillespie, T. (2018). Custodians of the Internet. Yale University Press.; Roberts, S. T. (2019). Behind the Screen. Yale University Press. ; Tufekci, Z. (2015). Algorithmic harms beyond Facebook and Google. Colorado Technology Law Journal.
[5] Couldry, N. and Hepp, A. (2018) The continuing lure of the mediated centre in times of deep mediatization: Media Events and its enduring legacy Media, Culture & Society Vol. 40(1) 114–117; Dayan, Daniel ; Katz, Elihu (1992) Media Events: the live broadcasting of history. Harvard University Press

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election in July 2024, the Rwanda-Goma conflict in January 2025, and the diplomatic dispute between Rwanda with Belgium in March 2025.

The original concept of a media event was informed by the Durkheimian sociology of ritual and referred to national media systems capacity to generate moments of national solidarity through many aspects of media (production, distribution, management of reception and subsequent commentary). Under contemporary media conditions – global media corporations, transnational social media and fragmented audiences - the power of national broadcasters, however financed and governed, to generate such events is challenged[6]. Yet the Rwandan case demonstrates to the capacity of an authoritarian regime with limited resources to control the narrative around an event nationally and to exercise significantly influence internationally, using a combination of internal suppression, automation, and orchestration of volunteers.

Our analysis of the role of the diaspora is based on interviews with Rwandans living in France and Belgium as well as participant observations at the Genocide memorial event in Paris 7th April 2025 and an event organised by the CRF (Commaunité Rwandaise de France) on the war in eastern DRC. We interviewed members of the diaspora who are active in diaspora organisations as well as others who are simply trying to live a life in Europe. We interviewed Rwandans who are supportive of the regime and others who are critical. Some are descendants of Hutu who fled in 1994 while others are Tutsi who fled in recent years. Getting access and gaining trust was challenging. We promised all respondents full anonymity, and did not record any interviews. There is no doubt that we were scrutinised by our respondents before they accepted interviews. At one point a respondent shared a photo of us, taken at the memorial event, and shared it amongst pro-regime members of the diaspora. Taken together, this rich material enables us to provide a picture of the tactics and techniques deployed by the Rwandan regime as well as actors who are independent but aligned with some of its goals.[7]

[6] Dayan & Katz, “Media Events: the live broadcasting of history”, p116

[7] While the conventional cyber security approach to the exploration of information manipulation and interference include identifying Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs), we are not including Procedures in our analyses. This is in line with common practice in the information defence community using the DISARM frameworks, which avoids describing procedures - as these could easily be picked up by adversaries as explicit guidebooks for conducting such operations.

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3. Suppressing Information Production

Before and during the genocide, the media was tightly controlled by the regime[8] and manipulated to reinforce hatred and incite violent attacks against the Tutsi and moderate Hutu[9]. Following the end of the genocide, Rwanda has been engaged in a project of reconstruction, receiving development aid from the international community (it currently represents 52% of the central government expenses as of 2023 according to the World Bank). In this context, domestic and foreign journalists, activists, and academics navigate restrictive legislation, surveillance, and threats from the state when they ask difficult questions. This has consequences for the type of questions they can ask, the topics they can cover, and the information that can ultimately reach the public in Rwanda and beyond.

3.1 The legal environment

Rwanda's Constitution, as well as its international and regional obligations, protect freedom of expression and press freedoms, but their implementation in practice remains uneven because laws are abused or ignored. President Kagame has for years been on the Reporters Without Borders list of Predators of Press Freedom. Building on an already strained media environment[10], Kagame's rule seems inextricably linked to reduced freedom of expression. This is reflected in the country's poor rankings, with Reporters Without Borders classifying it as facing a 'very serious' situation in terms of freedom of expression.

The restrictive environment at the information production stage is enabled by a web of laws that suppress information. The majority of restrictions comes from the Penal Code, which criminalises numerous speech-related acts, including 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 offences against the ruling power or the President of the Republic.

[8] Higiro, J.-M. V. (2007). Rwandan Private Print Media on the Eve of the Genocide. In A. Thompson (Ed.), The Media & the Rwanda Genocide (pp. 73–89). Pluto Press.
[9] 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.
[10] International Media Support (2003), The Rwanda media experience from the genocide, http://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ims-assessment-rwanda-genocide-2003.pdf

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All those offences are easily weaponised against critics, largely because of their vague wording. This enables subjective interpretation while also disregarding the requirements of clarity, precision, proportionality and necessity that human rights law imposes on restrictions to free speech.

Another set of laws that are used to stifle information production are those on sectarianism and genocide ideology. The former prohibits "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, though justified by the country's past, and compared by the government to Holocaust denial legislation, lack the accompanying safeguards and guarantees that usually constrain such legislation[11]

Box 2 Laws restricting information production in Rwanda

Penal Code (last modified 2018)

- Various offences used for criminalisation of critical opinions such a"sectarianism," "divisionism," "false information or harmful propaganda with intent to cause a hostile international opinion against Rwanda"
- Vaguely worded offences that allow subjective interpretation

Antiterrorism Framework (Penal Code, Articles 166, 204, 230 and Law No 45/2008 of 09/09/2008)

- Systematically turned against dissidents, under the vague pretext of 'national security' protection

Law on Prevention and Punishment of Cyber Crimes (Law 60 of 2018)

- Includes the offence of spreading rumours "that may make a person lose their credibility," which is commonly used against dissidents

Genocide denial law (Law 59 of 2018)

- Shrinks freedom of expression without providing the necessary guarantees. It covers a broad range of actions, without requiring any imminent risk and not passing the test of necessity or proportionality, as foreseen in human rights law.

Media Law (Law No. 02/2013 Regulating Media in Rwanda)

- Foresees licenses for journalists and media outlets, which are often revoked arbitrarily, based on vague justifications such as 'violating media ethics or public order.'
- Does not cover citizen bloggers and thus they are deprived of even minimum protections.

[11] Jonathan Beloff highlights how Rwandan government often tries to tie in the Holocaust to justify anti-denial laws. But Holocaust denial laws in Europe factor in protections of speech, have stricter definitions of what constitutes denial, and do not try to prescribe specific ideological norms to the accused. Beloff, Jonathan R. (2025). "Combating Genocide Denial through Rwanda's Foreign Policy." Genocide Studies and Prevention 18 (3): 11–27., p22

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Both laws lack clarity and precision, covering a broad range of actions, without requiring any imminent risk and not passing the test of necessity or proportionality, as usually happens with restrictions to freedom of speech. Their lack of clarity and precision raised concerns[12] and led the government to refine them in 2008, 2013 and 2018[13]. The current iteration of the law[14] finally incorporated international definitions for genocide and better defined the scope of what constitutes genocide ideology. Still, authorities apply them broadly,[15] mainly as an intimidation practice[16], and charges are brough against academics[17] and persons critical of government policy[18]. In addition, instead of serving legality, the laws reinforce state power by instrumentalising Rwanda's ethnic history, and while framed as tools for national unity, are applied selectively to silence dissent, rather than genuinely preventing conflict.

Charges are also brought under various pieces of legislation, ostensibly enacted to protect national security, or combat digital crime, and reinforced by the strict regulation of online media through the Media Law. Again, the country's past is invoked to justify broad media restrictions in the name of safeguarding public order, good morals, reputation, and private life. Citizens, youtubers, bloggers, journalists and politicians are charged with a rich set of offences that criminalise free speech, in what Human rights Watch called a 'wave of free

[12] Amnesty International,(2010) Safer to Stay Silent: The Chilling Effect of Rwanda's Laws on 'Genocide Ideology' and 'Sectarianism'; Human Rights Watch (2008), 'Law and Reality: Progress in Judicial Reform in Rwanda, https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/07/25/law-and-reality/progress-judicial-reform-rwanda .

[13] The 2013, law repeals its previous iterations. Law 84/2013, which entered into force in October 2013, contains amendments to the 2008 Law on the crime of genocide ideology, see https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/pages/attachments/2015/04/09/fh-free-press_2014_rwanda.pdf.

[14] Law 59/ 2018 on the Crime of Genocide Ideology and Related Crimes.

[15] Louis Gitinywa (2020), "A snapshot of Rwanda's genocide law," Pen/Opp, https://worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/rwandan-genocide/rwandas-application-and-misuse-of-genocide-denial-laws

[16] See the speech of Laurent Munyandilikirwa, a Rwandan human rights activist, who during 2015 testimony before the African Court of Justice stated that "Genocide ideology law is a form of intimidation, if you dare to criticise what is not going well in this country, you are tagged as a genocide denier, so citizens and members of the civil society prefer to shut up." Laurent Munyandilikirwa, Testimony before the African Court of Justice (2015), cited in 'How Does Rwanda's Genocide Ideology Law Regulate Speech Online?' Advox (20 July 2020), https://advox.globalvoices.org/2020/07/20/how-does-rwandas-genocide-ideology-law-regulate-speech-online/.

[17] See the case of Aimable Karasira Small Media, 'Rwanda UPR Submission Session 51 4th Cycle' (n.d.) https://res.cloudinary.com/cld-storage/image/upload/v1753265134/Small_Media_Rwanda_UPR_Submission_Session_51_4th_cycle_6efd1e87c6.pdf , p. 8.

[18] US Department of State, '2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Rwanda,'

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speech prosecutions.'[19] The legal arsenal is complemented by extra-legal methods to silence critics, ranging from murders and harassment to arbitrary arrests and surveillance.

3.2 Limiting access

While Rwanda relies on its legislation to constrain domestic information production, it also targets foreign producers of information and knowledge to suppress the production of information that is not aligned with the regime's interests. The tactic of limiting access describes a set of techniques used to limit the type of information that can be produced about the country. It consists both in limiting access to the country and limiting access to certain types of data by deploying a range of techniques.

One of the main techniques consists of limiting access to the country to foreign journalists, civil society organisations, or academics. Bureaucratic systems are used to control the objectives of the individual seeking to cross the border to produce information (or knowledge) and select only those who appear to pursue goals aligned with the image the country aims to project.

Rwanda has become notoriously difficult to access as a research site, with lengthy processes required ahead of travel. In addition to securing their visa, academic researchers are required to secure approval from Rwanda's national ethics committee, as well as a research permit. Researchers are also required to partner with a local organisation[20]. These types of procedures are not unique to Rwanda, they are also applied in neighbouring Uganda for example, as well as by European countries, to non-EU residents. What makes it a technique of information suppression is *how* rules are applied. Grey areas are used to limit what questions can be asked and what information can be accessed[21]. Researchers report experiencing moving targets, for example being asked to document support from additional partners in the process of securing ethics approval, within a limited amount of time[22].

[19] Human Rights Watch (2022), 'Rwanda: Wave of Free Speech Prosecutions' https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/16/rwanda-wave-free-speech-prosecutions ; Human Rights Watch, and (2021) 'Rwanda: Arrests, Prosecutions over YouTube Posts' (30 March 2021) https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/30/rwanda-arrests-prosecutions-over-youtube-posts .
[20] Jessee, Erin. (2012). 'Conducting Fieldwork in Rwanda'. Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue Canadienne d'études Du Développement 33 (2): 266–74.
[21] Loyle, Cyanne E. (2016). 'Overcoming Research Obstacles in Hybrid Regimes: Lessons from Rwanda'. Social Science Quarterly 97 (4): 923–35.
[22] Jessee, Erin. (2013). 'Rwanda's Subtle Forms of Intimidation'. Times Higher Education, December 19. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/comment/opinion/rwandas-subtle-forms-of-intimidation/2009974.article.

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The result can be that researchers choose other countries to study in order to stay within time schedules. 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 border to enter the country are still used to restrict access, as recounted by academics being told their visa was invalid upon arriving[23], or as experienced by Human Rights Watch researchers following the publication of critical reports.[24]

Another technique is to limit access to data, including census data or information about the functioning of the government and its administrations . While the country's Access to Information law was heralded for setting new standards in the field and for protecting whistleblowers[25], it gives wide latitude for the authorities to refuse disclosure of information that might be politically sensitive or embarrassing. Such refusals are justified under the exemption for information that could 'destabilise national security' or 'impede enforcement of law or justice', without clear limits[26]. This results in only a very small number of positive responses to access requests,[27] placing large barriers for journalists as well as anticorruption activists, who cannot fulfil their role in keeping government institutions accountable.

It is worth noting that researchers report difficulties in accessing data from opinion surveys – recommending alternative avenues in cases where public institutions refuse access[28]. Others have questioned the quality of data about Rwanda that the government produces and transfers to international institutions such as the World Bank. For example, the quality of data on poverty in Rwanda has been questioned by several researchers[29], with some identifying issues that seem to indicate that statistical data have been manipulated to paint an overly positive picture of the development of the country[30].

[23] Jessee(2013) 'Rwanda's Subtle Forms of Intimidation'
[24] 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
[25] ARTICLE 19 Eastern Africa (2014), 'Rwanda: Access to Information Law 2014' https://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/38389/Rwanda-Access-To-information-2014.pdf
[26] 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
[27] Freedom House. (2025). Rwanda: Freedom in the World 2025 Country Report. https://freedomhouse.org/country/rwanda/freedom-world/2025
[28] Loyle (2016). 'Overcoming Research Obstacles in Hybrid Regimes'.
[29] 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.
[30] Reyntjens, Filip. (2015). 'Lies, Damned Lies and Statistics: Poverty Reduction Rwandan-Style and How the Aid Community Loves It'. African Arguments, November 3. https://africanarguments.org/2015/11/lies-damned-lies-and-statistics-poverty-reduction-rwandan-style-and-how-the-aid-community-loves-it/.

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3.3 Monitoring activities

The second main tactic used to suppress the production of information in Rwanda consists of monitoring the activities of journalists, researchers and activists. There are many accounts of the role played by fixers, partner organisations, and even Rwanda's national ethics committee in surveillance**.** For example, French television journalists show how their fixer – a local journalist – was required to report their plans to the government's speaker daily, and was asked to adjust them, reorienting the work of journalists[31]. They also show how their interlocutors are pressured to give certain answers.

Similar phenomena are reported by academics who recount how partner organisations or government representatives regularly asked them to provide the list of individuals they have interviewed or to show their notes[32]. Others have reported how the national ethics committee sometimes require complete research notes or interview recordings[33], something that goes against fundamental principles of scientific and journalistsic ethics if interviewees have asked to be anonymised.

The surveillance deployed by the state also includes monitoring private communication via spyware such as NSO's Pegasus, which Rwanda used to surveill journalists, activists and politicians domestically as well as in South Africa[34] and Belgium[35]. Other types of spyware seem to have neem used by the Rwandan state for similar pruposes, even as it ceased to have access to Pegasus in 2021[36].

Ultimately, Rwanda has a track record of threatening those who produce information and knowledge based on findings from their surveillance. Some of them have been sent to "re-

[31] «Rwanda: Un miracle africain à marche forcée", shown on 29 August 2021. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GNU1ZEdnOyg

[32] 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.

[33] Jessee (2013). 'Rwanda's Subtle Forms of Intimidation'..

[34] van Eyssen, B. (2021, July 22). South Africa's Ramaphosa listed as Rwanda spyware target. Deutsche Welle. https://corporate.dw.com/en/south-africas-ramaphosa-listed-as-rwanda-spyware-target/a-58589933

[35] European Parliament. (2023, July 15). Investigation of the use of Pegasus and equivalent surveillance spyware (Recommendation). https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0244_EN.pdf; Amnesty International (2021) Rwandan authorities chose thousands of activists, journalists and politicians to target with NSO spyware. July 19. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/07/rwandan-authorities-chose-thousands-of-activists-journalists-and-politicians-to-target-with-nso-spyware/

[36] Reynaud, F., & Rueckert, P. (2024, May 29). Au Rwanda, opposants et proches du régime ciblés par le logiciel espion Pegasus pendant des années. Le Monde. https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/05/29/au-rwanda-opposants-et-proches-du-regime-cibles-par-le-logiciel-espion-pegasus-pendant-des-annees_6236172_3210.html

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education programmes" while their passport was withheld[37] or deported from the country[38], 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[39].

Producing independent information that is critical of the power in place has thus become extremely difficult, first and foremost for domestic journalists, academics, and human rights activists who face repression efforts.[40] However, this has also become extremely difficult for external actors such as foreign journalists, researchers and activists. The level of restrictions of information production in Rwanda is so high that it affects the questions that can be asked, as well as how they can be answered. The kind of information that circulates about Rwanda is likely affected, and it becomes difficult to measure the extent of what is hidden. This is particularly important in light of other efforts deployed by Rwanda and aligned actors to influence the dissemination and salience of information critical of the regime.

3.4 TTPs targeting information production

TACTIC	TECHNIQUE
Limiting access to the country to independent journalists and researchers	Leverage strict requirements to secure research permits and visas. Making requirements difficult to fulfil (for example, requesting list of interviewees be regularly shared with the authorities; requesting multiple printed copies of documentations; requiring multiple visits to the country before permits can be secured)
	Foster uncertainty throughout in-country visits: use discretionary or inconsistent controls at the border to refuse entry despite secured permits and visa
Limit access to data	Restrict access to survey data or census data: leverage the exemptions built in the right to information law

[37] 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.
[38] Nicaise, Guillaume. (2021). La bonne gouvernance au Rwanda et au Burundi: Petites réformes et grands arrangements. Editions L'Harmattan.
[39] Jessee (2013). 'Rwanda's Subtle Forms of Intimidation'.
[40] 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 https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/rw-stakeholders-info-s51

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	Share only positive data about the country: manipulate figures by changing how they are calculated to make them more positive
Monitor activities of journalists and researchers	Deploy surveillance software to monitor the activities of critics, including journalists. Infect devices or the devices of their contacts in the country
	Rely on the local contacts of journalists and researchers. Threaten or pay fixers or local organisation
	Leverage requirements attached to research permits, requests, research notes; interviewees lists

Table 1: TTPs targeting production

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4. Suppressing Information Dissemination

The media environment in Rwanda 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. Peace and reconstruction required the media sector in Rwanda to be reformed and professionalised, however, the way control over information is currently organised leads to a high level of polarisation outside Rwanda and fosters a climate of distrust of information in the country and beyond. More specifically, the legal environment in Rwanda enables strict control over what information can be shared. Beyond its borders, Rwanda has relied on diffirent tactics to limit the dissemination of information critical of the regime abroad, aiming to ensure its continued good standing, ensuring its survival and the continued support of the international community.

4.1 The legal environment

Rwandan media are tied to the genocide. In the Media Case[41] the ICTR convicted three media executives for inciting genocidal acts. It is this lingering memory of the media's role in the genocide[42] that has justified broad limitations to expression. Rwanda's media landscape is strictly controlled and stifled by a web of laws and regulations that allow the government to block the information dissemination stage, by closing outlets, blocking websites[43], monitoring and filtering publications and restricting access to digital platforms. Since Paul Kagame came to power, moderate estimates report more than thirty media outlets have been suspended[44]. The ICT Minister has sweeping powers to interrupt or suspend any electronic communication services or providers without prior judicial authorisation. The justifications are usually vague, such as dissemination of "grossly offensive," "indecent," or "annoying" messages, causing "needless anxiety" or inconvenience via electronic communications[45]. Similarly, the Media

[41] Prosecutor v. Nahimana et al., ICTR-99-52
[42] Thompson (2027) 'The Media and the Rwanda Genocide'.
[43] Kungu Al-Mahadi Adam (2019), "After SoftPower News in 2018, Rwanda Blocks Access to New Vision and Observer Websites," Soft Power News, August 26, https://web.archive.org/web/20200324114000/https://www.softpower.ug/after-softpower-news-in-2018-rwanda-blocks-access-to-new-vision-and-observer-websites/.
[44] Reporters Without Borders (2024) 'Rwanda: RSF Sounds Alarm over President Kagame's Horrific Press Freedom Record as Election Looms' 31 December, https://rsf.org/en/rwanda-rsf-sounds-alarm-president-kagame-s-horrific-press-freedom-record-election-looms
[45] ARTICLE 19 (2018) 'Analysis of Rwanda ICT Law',https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Analysis-Rwanda-ICT-Law-April-2018.pdf ; DefendDefenders (2025), 'Republic of Rwanda: Joint Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review 51st Session',

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Law[46] includes broad limitations to protect public order, good morals, reputation, and private life[47].

Box 3: Law Governing Information and Communication Technologies

Genocide denial law (Law 59 of 2018)

- Shrinks freedom of expression without providing the necessary guarantees. It covers a broad range of actions, without requiring any imminent risk and not passing the test of necessity or proportionality, as foreseen in human rights law.
- Criminalises the denial, minimisation, or justification of genocide, including online.

Media Law (Law No. 02/2013 Regulating Media in Rwanda)

- Includes broad limitations to protect public order, good morals, reputation, and private life.

Law on data protection (Law No. 058/2021)

- Requires ICT companies to receive licenses, to inform the National Cyber Security Authority about their processing activities, to store data within Rwanda and transfer them abroad only upon authorisation, requirements that can facilitate state access to personal data.

Law on interception of communications (Law 60/2013)

- All communication service providers are required to ensure that their system is technically capable of enabling communications interception upon request.
- Allows Rwandan security agencies to hack into the telecommunication network without the communication provider knowledge or assistance.

Law on Prevention and Punishment of Cyber Crimes (Law 60 of 2018)

- Prohibits the distribution of harmful content, that has been interpreted to include indecent information and rumours that may incite fear or violence.
- Service providers must remove content notified as illegal or harmful by the authorities.

Law Relating to Electronic Messages, Electronic Signatures and Electronic Transactions (Law No. 18/2010)

- Service providers are required to remove content when handed a takedown notice, and there are no mechanisms for appeal.

https://defenddefenders.org/republic-of-rwanda-joint-submission-to-the-un-universal-periodic-review-51st-session-of-the-upr-working-group-2 /; CIPESA (2023), 'Summary Report on the State of Freedom of Expression in Rwanda', https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/reports/Summary-Report-on-the-State-of-Freedom-of-Expression-Rwanda.pdf

[46] Law No. 02/2013 Regulating Media in Rwanda.

[47] Legal Aid Rwanda, 'Module on International and National Frameworks on Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists,' https://www.legalaidrwanda.org/includes/pdf/research/Module%20on%20international%20and%20national%20frameworks%20on%20freedom%20of%20expression%20and%20safety%20of%20journalists.pdf

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Law on Governing Information and Communication Technologies (Law No. 24/2016)

- Criminalises dissemination of content vaguely defined as “grossly offensive,” “indecent,” or “annoying” messages, causing “needless anxiety” or inconvenience via electronic communications.
- Grants the Minister of ICT sweeping powers to interrupt electronic communication services or providers without prior judicial authorisation, on grounds including vaguely defined offenses like “grossly offensive” content or public order concerns.

Notably, censorship extends beyond domestic outlets. The BBC Kinyarwanda broadcast was banned from the country following the BBC (in the United Kingdom) broadcast of a documentary on the genocide, which Rwanda accused of denialism. The move was largely considered as communicating a message of control over what is considered truth mainly to foreign rather than domestic audiences. 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 local and international news sites are blocked. Website owners have no avenue of appeal.

In addition, all electronic communication services have to acquire respective licenses, under broad and subjective criteria. As a result, licences of media outlets have often been revoked under murky 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 users’ privacy. Data protection and localisation laws allow the state to have access to personal information, and companies are obliged to cooperate. This fosters a climate of perceived surveillance over communications that has a chilling effect on 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, encouraging over-removal of critical material.

4.2 Discrediting critics

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

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regime organised a campaign to discredit its authors, publishing a website that constituted mostly of character assassinations[48]. The book included contributions written by an international network of researchers in a variety of disciplines, including from Rwanda. Many authors writing critically about Rwanda have faced similar discrediting campaigns, in Rwandan media or, more recently, online.

This type of campaign is not reserved 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 of this investigation was met by a coordinated online campaign[49], which relied on an existing network of accounts used in a campaign to propagate a positive image of Rwanda beyond its borders. To target the investigation, this network of accounts used AI-generated images and messages to discredit the journalists behind the investigation, including by accusing them of genocide denial[50]. It was followed by attempts to discredit the journalists, including by some academic specialists of the genocide, and other journalists in an open letter published in two Paris-based weekly newspapers[51]. These focus 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. Note that the open letter was apparently organised independently of the regime.

The example of the campaign targeting Forbidden Stories showcases how campaigns can morph and be multifaceted. Some discrediting actions are clearly coordinated in a seemingly centralised manner (the waves of AI-generated posts), while other aspects depend much more on the regime's good reputation among certain journalists and academics who apparently coordinate independently from it, but in line with its narrative. Overall, this highlights how Rwanda manipulates the narrative to discredit critics by wielding accusations of denying the genocide against the Tutsi, and accusations of perpetuating colonial paradigms of seeing Rwandans – and more broadly, Africans – as somehow inferior and needing to be saved.

[48] Dukalskis, Alexander. (2021). Making the World Safe for Dictatorship. Oxford University Press. P147. See also https://theremakingrwanda.blogspot.com/

[49] 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. https://open.clemson.edu/mfh_reports/5/.

[50] This campaign is further investigated in section 5 on Salience, pp 28

[51] See (in French) an open letter reproduced in the France-based weeklies Le Point and Jeune Afrique https://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. https://www.zammagazine.com/investigations/1816-denying-a-genocide-by-investigating-a-car-accident.

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4.3 Using existing complaint mechanisms

While the examples above show how Internet, social media, and expert networks can be leveraged to discredit critics, as second tactic consists of using existing complaint mechanisms within media organisations to attempt to suppress the dissemination of information.

The most famous example is the case of a controversial BBC documentary aired on one of its UK channels, criticising the current regime in Rwanda, and giving voice to alternative histories of the genocide[52]. On the one hand, following the diffusion of the documentary in the United Kingdom, Rwanda suspended the BBC's Kinyarwanda service, a decision criticised by observers as lacking procedural transparency, even as the chairperson of the Rwanda Media Commission faced retaliation for criticising the decision. On the other hand, 38 journalists and academics (some of whom were later to sign the letter against Forbidden Stories' investigations) sent a letter of complaint[53] to the BBC, and later to its Editorial Complaint Unit. The Unit concluded that the documentary did not deny the genocide, as did the BBC Trust[54]. Rwanda also created its own Commission of Enquiry on the documentary which came to the opposite conclusion.

Again, this shows how Rwanda has attempted to suppress the dissemination of this documentary beyond its borders (as it was never shown in Rwanda), targeting the BBC service active in the country by using techniques that are similar to SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation). It also shows forms of indirect suppression: the BBC's complaint mechanism was mobilised by individuals supporting the regime, not by the regime itself. Here, allegations of genocide denial are used in another way: not to discredit individuals, but to influence broadcasting decisions.

A similar technique has been used in France, this time involving the French courts. Journalist and commentator Natacha Polony was sued before the courts for "contesting the existence of a crime against humanity" during a radio debate[55], where which she criticised the RPF for "its crimes before, during, and after the genocide"[56]. This was the first trial of this kind in

[52] Reyntjens, Filip. (2015). 'The Struggle over Truth – Rwanda and the BBC'. African Affairs 114 (457): 637–48.
[53] The letter was reproduced in Rwanda media outlet The New Times at https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/112313/News/global-researchers-protest-bbc-genocide-revisionist-film
[54] BBC Trust Editorial Standards Committee. (2015). 'Editorial Standards Findings - Appeals to the Trust and Other Editorial Issues Considered by the Editorial Standards Committee'. December.
[55] AFP. (2022, May 20). La journaliste Natacha Polony relaxée d'une accusation de contestation du génocide au Rwanda.
[56] AFP. (2022, March 1). A la barre, Natacha Polony se défend d'avoir nié le génocide au Rwanda.

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France, since the addition of this restriction in French legislation in 2017. The lawsuit was filed by three civil society organisations: Ibuka France, an organisation supporting victims of the genocide, together with the Communauté Rwandaise de France[57], and the Mrap[58]. The journalist was found not guilty, and the judge noted that considering her words as contesting the existence of a crime against humanity was extrapolating them, especially as they had been immediately followed by the reaffirmation of the existence of the genocide[59]. This was confirmed by the Court of Appeal[60].

Another case was filed against writer and political scientist Charles Onana by three different organisations: the Human Rights League (Ligue des Droits de l'Homme), the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (Fédération Internationale des Droits de l'Homme) and Survie ("Survival" in English). Here, the court condemned Charles Onana for book exerpts considering the genocide "a conspiracy theory"[61] . The decision has been appealed.

These two cases highlight the complexity of these kind of trials. While one case can be read as an attempt to control what can be said about the RPF, the other one presents a much clearer case of denying the existence of a crime against humanity. The courts did manage to differentiate between the two. Two organisations aligned with the current regime in Rwanda filed the complaint in the first case[62]. Note that the FIDH, one of the organisations filing the second lawsuit, emphasised they criticise both genocide denial and the human rights violations conducted by Paul Kagame and the FPR in Rwanda in a press release during the trial[63].

The examples of the discrediting campaigns against journalists, and of the use of complaints mechanisms by individuals or organisations aligned with the regime show also that suppressing information is not necessarily centrally coordinated. Instead, these cases show that information suppression can be the result of a successful promotional campaign around the regime, who has managed to promote a positive image of peace and prosperity[64]. These

[57] See section on the diaspora, page XX for more details on this organisation.
[58] AFP (2022), "La journaliste Natacha Polony relaxée"
[59] AFP (2022), "La journaliste Natacha Polony relaxée"
[60] AFP & Ouest-France. (2023, May 11). Natacha Polony n'a pas contesté le génocide au Rwanda, juge la cour d'appel de Paris.. https://www.ouest-france.fr/monde/rwanda/natacha-polony-na-pas-conteste-le-genocide-au-rwanda-juge-la-cour-dappel-de-paris-404f2a2c-f008-11ed-bc4b-ac1b06b7bf07
[61] Libération & AFP (2024, December 9). Génocide des Tutsis au Rwanda: L'auteur franco-camerounais Charles Onana condamné à une amende pour négationnisme. Libération.
[62] The role of both organisations in controlling the Rwandan diaspora is discussed in the section on the diaspora, pp 42-43
[63] International Federation for Human Rights. (2024). "Opening of the Trial of Charles Onana in Paris, on the 7 October 2024." Accessed January 5, 2026. https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/rwanda/opening-of-the-trial-of-charles-onana-in-paris-on-the-7-october-2024.
[64] Dukalskis (2021), 'Making the World Safe for Dictatorship' pp139-158

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attacks and discrediting campaigns using the (unwarranted) arguments 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: their first line of defence is often that they are being persecuted for their political opinion.

4.4 TTPs targeting information dissemination

TACTIC	TECHNIQUE
Discredit critics	Online campaigns to attack the character of those who produce knowledge or information. Create websites; use coordinated social media accounts and AI to generate large quantity of content attacking individuals
	Leverage networks of supporters abroad to co-sign open letters and petitions
Leverage complaint mechanisms	Aligned actors accuse critics of denying the genocide by filing complaints to control insntances, or filing lawsuits

Table 2 TTPs targeting dissemination

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5. Managing Information Salience

Online platforms play an increasingly important role in shaping global perceptions of Rwanda. Activity on social media often amplifies official narratives, while diaspora critics and journalists may face online pushback and struggle to gain visibility. These are not sporadic tactics but an institutionalised strategy, where salience is carefully manufactured.

Salience management refers to the strategic shaping of what becomes visible, dominant, and emotionally resonant in algorithmically mediated public discourse, regardless of whether alternative content formally remains accessible[65]. The flooding is amplified by individuals who are not under direct orders from the state but who nevertheless choose to magnify the state narrative for fear of reprisals and in hope of proving their loyalty. Narratives about, sports, tourism, efficiency, Kagame's leadership, and Rwanda's global partnerships are amplified; while critical accounts of human rights abuses, lack of political freedom, or military interference in neighbouring countries are drowned out and discredited through ridicule and character assassination.

By promoting a narrative of progress and national unity, dissenting voices are portrayed as divisive and unpatriotic. This produces a distorted field of perception—one that privileges regime narratives while suppressing dissenting voices.

Across Rwanda's digital environment, control over information is not incidental — it is strategic and systematic. The online environment is dominated by pro-government voices that work to amplify the Rwandan Patriotic Front's (RPF) preferred image while silencing critical perspectives. Evidence from social media data – from around the release of Rwanda Classified by Forbidden Stories in May 2024 – shows how coordinated campaigns[66] are used to shape what becomes visible, what fades into silence, and what is discredited altogether (DiA).

This digital dominance is not random noise; it reflects a deliberate architecture of influence. Findings from Forbidden Stories: Rwanda Classified and Human Rights Watch suggest that the state's approach blends reputation management, intimidation, and the use of advanced digital tools to reinforce its preferred narrative — both domestically and abroad.

[65] Gillespie (2018). 'Custodians of the Inter*net;* Roberts (2019). 'Behind the Screen'; Tufekci (2015). 'Algorithmic harms beyond Facebook and Google'.
[66] Bessi, A. and Ferrara, E., (2016). Social bots distort the 2016 US Presidential election online discussion. First monday, 21(11-7); Pacheco, D., Hui, P.M., Torres-Lugo, C., Truong, B.T., Flammini, A. and Menczer, F (2021), May. Uncovering coordinated networks on social media: methods and case studies. In Proceedings of the international AAAI conference on web and social media (Vol. 15, pp. 455-466).

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Drawing on social media data analysis and qualitative evidence, we uncover a systematic strategy of information suppression moves beyond simple censorship to actively manage information salience—determining which topics dominate public discourse.

5.1 Celebrating the president, the nation and its culture

We did a systematic digital ethnograph[67] of 33 accounts on X over two months in early 2025. Just like with traditional ethnography, this included carving out a field site checking in daily, following conversations and taking fieldnotes. However, we did not interact with the respondents, as this would have repercussions for our access. We have analysed how they curate their profiles on X and found the following recurring themes. Many would have photos of the president, and the presidential family in their profile. Some would have photos of the president in uniform, inspecting the armed forces. Others would simply have photos glorifying the armed forces – interestingly some women had photos of attractive young women in combat gear. Another theme circled around Kigali as a modern city with pictures of the congress centre and high-rise buildings. Finally, some celebrated Rwandan tradition; photos of long-horned traditional cattle, women dancing the traditional dance that emulates the cattle, and even black and white photos of the traditional warriors at the royal court. The Rwandan flag features prominently on most of the profiles, often accompanied by the Canadian or US flags – signalling diasporic allegiances – and sometimes the Israeli flag. The latter might relate to a common narrative that the Tutsi, like the Jews, face a threat of extermination, and only the state of Rwanda and Israel respectively can guarantee their security.

In other words, these profiles are keen to exhibit their allegiance to the president and their belief in the narrative about progress and modernity while also showcasing a strong pride in their cultural heritage. The latter feeds into the regime's strong anti-colonial discourse and commitment to an African renaissance. Finally, the military strength of the state is promoted and legitimised. By flooding online platforms with these images, they delegitimise opponents as unpatriotic, as gambling with the security of the people, and as against progress.

[67] Boellstorff, T. (2020). Rethinking Digital Anthropology. In (pp. 39-60): Routledge; Hampton, K. N. (2017). Studying the Digital: Directions and Challenges for Digital Methods. Annual Review of Sociology, 43, 167-188; Postill, J., & Pink, S. (2012). Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a Messy Web. Media International Australia, 145(1), 123-134.

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5.2 Salience and Network Analysis

While the ethnographic analysis documents how pro-regime aesthetics, loyalties, and affective performances are enacted, social network analysis shows how attention is distributed, amplified, and displaced at scale. Rather than evaluating content accuracy, this approach focuses on interactional dynamics—which accounts are amplified, which remain peripheral, and which narratives persist across communities. In networked information environments, salience is not inherent to information itself but emerges from platform-mediated patterns of repetition, connectivity, and reach[68]. Peripheral in salience refers to actors or clusters that are present and active in the network but whose content generates limited retweet amplification and weak cross-cluster diffusion, resulting in low visibility in the broader discourse.

Analysis of interaction patterns for special events on X – such as the release of Forbidden stories: Rwanda Classified (2024), the Rwandan election in July 2024, the conflict in eastern DRC in January 2025, and the diplomatic issue of Rwanda with Belgium in March 2025 (MINAFFET) – show that public attention is concentrated on a small number of highly visible accounts. These have a limited two-way discussion and a strong emphasis on broadcasting rather than dialogue. While journalists and human right activists continue to participate, they tend to remain on the edges of these networks and receive comparatively little engagement. This suggests that information suppression works less by removing content and more by redirecting attention: critical perspectives are present but fail to gain lasting visibility or traction, whereas emotionally compelling and visually striking posts get more attention and remain in circulation longer, and hence shape the narratives which dominate public debate.

MERGED PATTERN	SUMMARY OF WHAT HAPPENS	OVERALL EFFECT ON VISIBILITY
Concentrated, one-way amplification	Attention is dominated by a small number of prominent accounts, with information mostly shared through reposting rather than conversation or debate.	A narrow set of narratives dominates, while alternative viewpoints struggle to gain traction.

[68] Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. Oxford University Press; McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public opinion quarterly*, *36*(2), 176-187.

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Emotional and visual intensification	Emotionally charged content—often using repeated, stylised, or edited images and videos—is widely shared and gains high engagement.	Emotional appeal outweighs factual reporting, reinforcing dominant frames through repetition and familiarity.
Ridicule and symbolic targeting	Defamation and character assassination of critics, who are mocked or dehumanised through memes and edited visuals.	Discourages dissent, reduces sympathy for targeted groups, and narrows acceptable viewpoints.
Marginalisation of critical voices	Journalists, NGOs, and critics remain active but are weakly connected and receive limited amplification.	Critical information circulates but reaches only small audiences.
Coordinated attention shifts	Users respond to cues from influential accounts, producing rapid topic changes and bursts of aligned content.	Sustained focus on sensitive issues is disrupted, pushing competing narratives out of view without direct censorship.

Table 3: How attention and visibility are shaped on X.

5.2.1 Memes, Visuals, and Affective Salience

Visual content—including memes[69] , edited images, and highly stylised or synthetic-looking media—plays a central role in salience production. Such visuals are used both to glorify leadership and to ridicule opponents, condensing complex political claims into emotionally legible cues. Rather than attributing intent or authorship, this study examines how these visuals function within networks: they travel faster than text, attract higher engagement[70] and reinforce in-group boundaries through humour and humiliation[71] .

[69] Shifman, L., (2013). Memes in digital culture. MIT press.
[70] Aljalabneh AA (2024) Visual media literacy: educational strategies to combat image and video disinformation on social media. Front. Commun. 9:1490798.
[71] Phillips, W., & Milner, R. M. (2017). Decoding memes: Barthes' punctum, feminist standpoint theory, and the political significance of# YesAllWomen. In Entertainment values: How do we assess entertainment and why does it matter? (pp. 195-211). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK

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Box 4: The Goma invasion and the Rwanda-DRC conflict in early 2025

In January 2025, the M23 entered and conquered the important city of Goma in eastern DRC. As the M23 advanced, the themes on X changed. Every two to three days a new theme emerged; a new set of similar images were circulated and reposted. In the first days after capturing Goma, pictures of happy residents and greeting soldiers flourished. This was followed by pictures of European mercenaries being disarmed by M23 (see figure 6).

Then came several posts ridiculing the South African troops and the South African president after the government of South Africa had complained about attacks on its peace-keeping troops.

Comments like 'You chose the wrong side. Cry-baby cry' demonstrated a strong self-confidence. Opponents were dismissed as genocidaires and supporting FDLR – irrespective of the point being made. Heads of state were ridiculed in different ways. The presidents of DRC and Burundi were portrayed as obese, corrupt and primitive with poor education and bad manners; the classical African leader (figure 5). More powerful and educated leaders such as Cyril Ramaphosa would be depicted as a weak child. Finally, European leaders were depicted as hypocrites (see figure 2).

At times, the images were contested by opposition figures. Much effort is put into questioning the authenticity of images, accusing the other side of using AI. For instance, a photo depicting M23 soldiers at Goma airport was claimed to be fake and ridiculed by inserting images of old ladies with bow and arrows instead (figure 7).

Since diplomatic ties between Rwanda and Belgium were cut in March 2025, an online influence operation has emerged on social media platforms—particularly on X—where thousands of coordinated posts from accounts linked to Rwanda disparage Belgian politicians, accuse Belgium of neocolonial interference, and amplify anti-Belgian sentiment. They do so by using repeated hashtags and visuals, often aided by AI tools to create a sense of widespread support and to drown out critical voices (VRT news). Figure 2 below shows a political cartoon circulated during the March 2025 Rwanda-Belgium diplomatic crisis, depicting a strong, resolute Rwandan figure pushing away a weeping, map-shaped figure representing Belgium.

The cartoon conveys themes consistent with government-aligned narratives of defiance and national unity against what they term Belgian "neo-colonial delusions" and attempts to destabilise the region via accusations of supporting M23 rebels in the eastern DRC. The cartoon encapsulates the view that Rwanda is stronger than ever and will not tolerate foreign interference. The text claims that Belgium 'is trying to divide Rwanda,' alluding to Belgium's

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responsibility for the genocide because of its colonial divide and rule. The figure on the right shows a character identified as the Belgian Prime Minister depicted exacerbating the fire by adding "GASOLINE," while Donald Trump is portrayed as attempting to extinguish it with water. The text accuses Belgium of sheltering 'genocidal ideologues' under the pretext of humanitarianism and claims that Belgium supports the Hutu extremist rebel group, the FDLR, in eastern DRC via Jambo ASBL. The latter is a diaspora association in Belgium, critical of the present government in Rwanda.

Figure 2: Examples of political cartoons and AI-assisted images for #MadeInBelgium campaign, published by Rwandan on X

5.2.2 Hybrid Human–AI Amplification and Delegitimisation

Temporal analysis shows repeated bursts of synchronised posting, often involving near-identical text or imagery. These patterns are consistent with coordinated (or automated)

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amplification rather than spontaneous engagement and reflect a hybrid ecology in which AI-assisted posting coexists with highly committed human actors[72]

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate these dynamics, highlighting temporal bursts and content redundancy, where identical messages are shared by multiple pro-regime accounts to reinforce key narratives and dominate attention. These tweets are connected to the January 2025 offensive against the city of Goma in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), but close to the Rwandan border. The offensive was led by the M23 – armed and supported by the Rwandan regime.

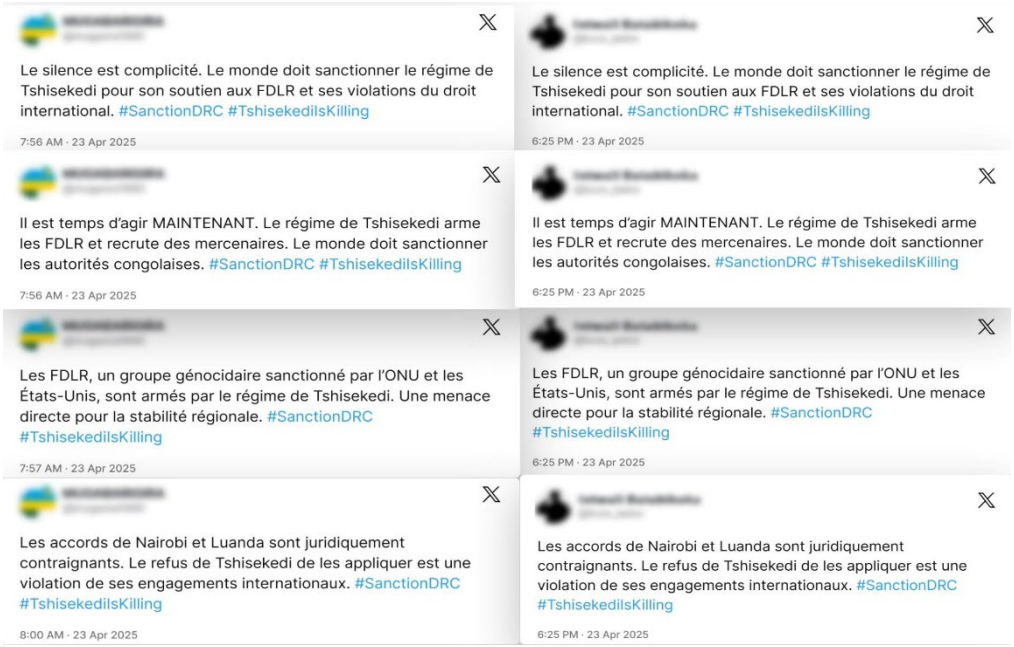

Figure 3: Temporal bursts and content redundancy in pro-regime posting.

The text in figure 4 is linking Congolese president Tshisekedi with a small rebel group, originally formed by Hutu extremists from Rwanda. It is important for M23 and the Rwandan government to frame the war as an existential defence of the Tutsi minority in eastern Congo against genocidal violence.

[72] Bessi & Ferrara, (2016) ' Social bots distort the 2016 US Presidential election online discussion'; Pacheco et al (2021) 'Uncovering coordinated networks on social media'.

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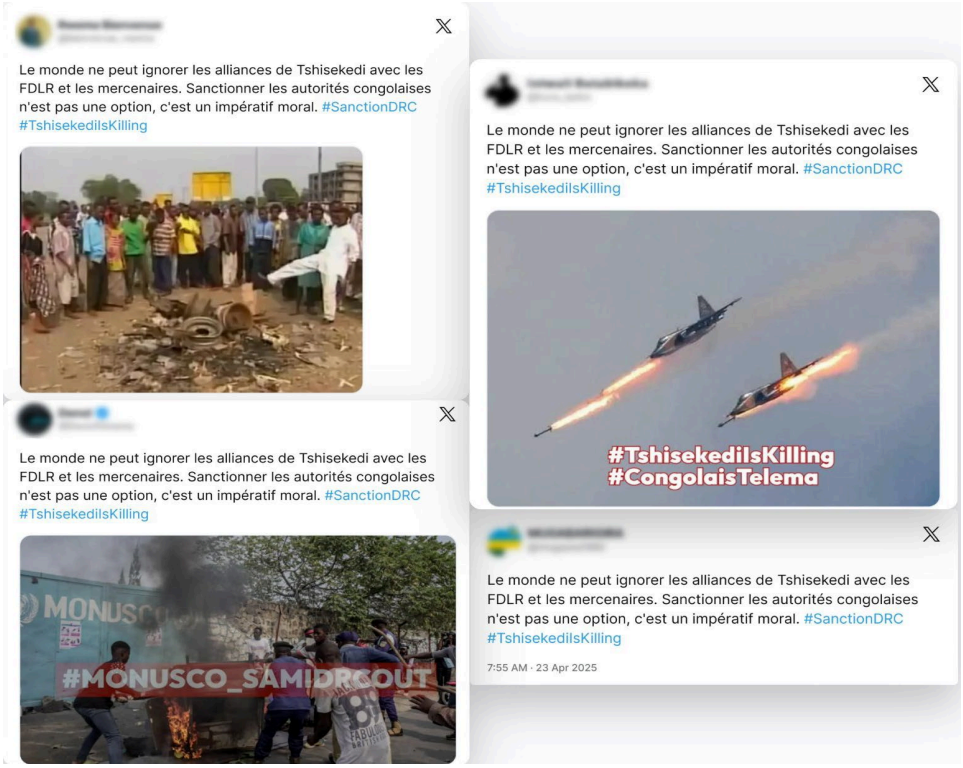

Figure 4: An example of tweets with an identical message shared by several profiles on X

Ridicule-based framing—frequently targeting opposition figures and foreign journalists—serves to delegitimise critics while redirecting attention away from substantive claims. From a salience perspective, ridicule lowers participation costs for supporters while discouraging deliberation[73] .

[73] Marwick, A., & Lewis, R. (2017). Media manipulation and disinformation online. *New York: Data & Society Research Institute*, *359*, 1146-1151.

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Figure 5: Burundian president Ndayishimiye sitting like a peasant eating raw sweet potatoes and drinking traditional beer

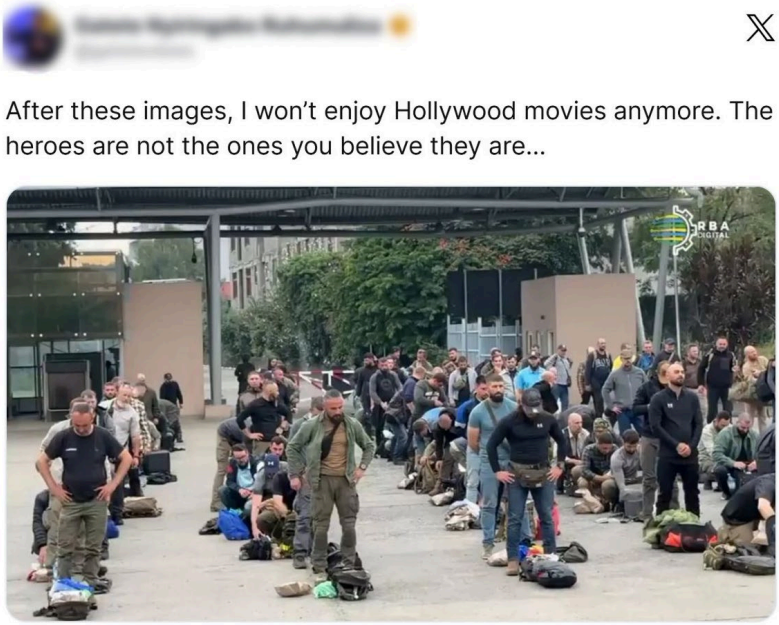

Figure 6: Images of 'white mercenaries' being disarmed by M23 in Goma, circulated at the end of January 2025, from an account belonging to a known pro-regime commentator in Rwanda. The aim of the post is to mock the West for its hypocricy in Africa. The profile is a known public figure in Rwanda

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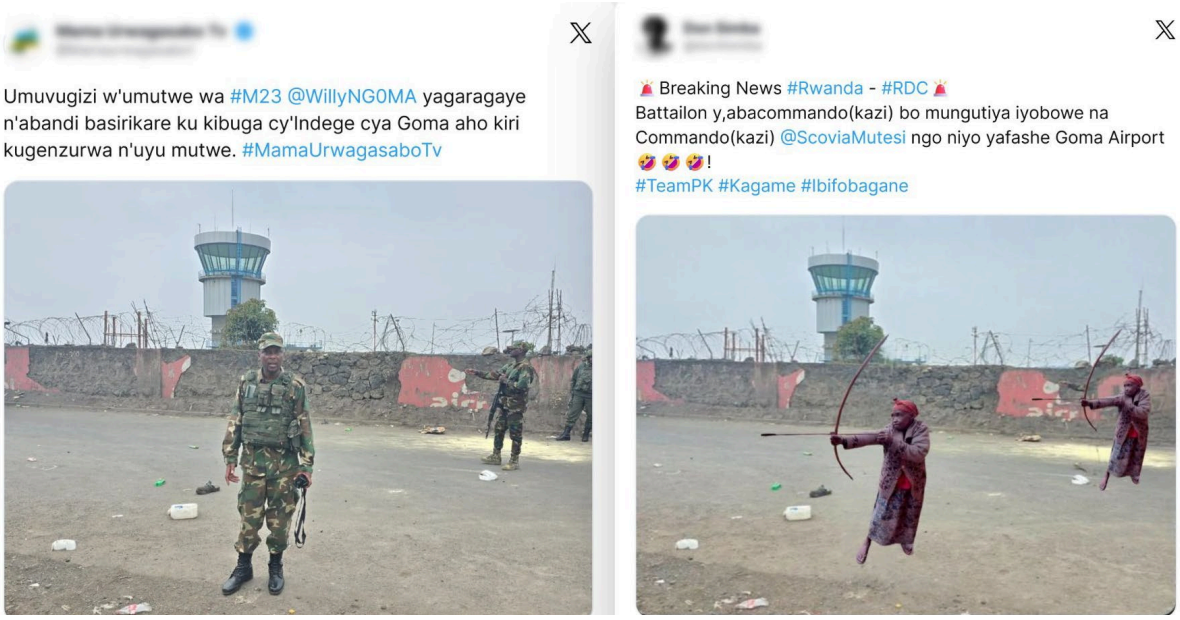

Figure 7: Shortly after pictures of M23 soldiers at Goma airport were posted on X, their authenticity was questioned by opposition figures who replaced the soldiers with Twa women with bows and arrows. Twa are widely stereotyped as primitive and are marginalised.

5.2.3 International Media Attention

International media played a key role in producing short-term salience around the conflict in the eastern DRC. Media Cloud data, tracking articles mentioning both “Goma” and “Rwanda”, show minimal coverage during the first half of January 2025, followed by a sharp spike between 26 and 29 January as M23 forces entered Goma and diplomatic tensions escalated (figure 8). This brief surge in attention was dominated by major international outlets and wire services using similar framing and vocabulary, and declined rapidly thereafter, indicating the episodic nature of media-driven salience.

Figure 8: Attention over time to “Goma AND Rwanda” in international news media, January 2025 (Mediacloud.org).

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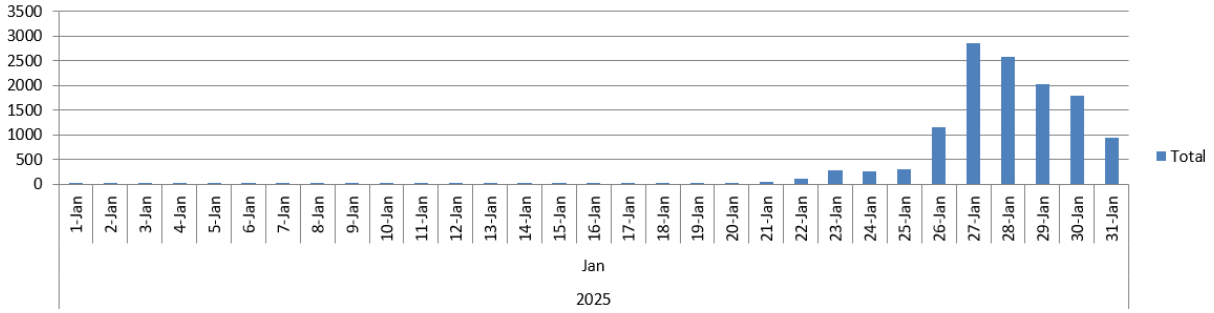

Figure 9: X activity over time: daily counts for Goma crisis in January 2025 using Goma and Rwanda as keywords.

5.2.4 Network construction, analytical focus and attention dynamics

Social media analysis was used to examine how attention and visibility are structured around the eastern DRC conflict on X. A directed interaction network was constructed from tweets (collected and analysed using NodeXL)[74] containing the keywords Rwanda and Goma, including replies, mentions, retweets, and quotes. The dataset includes 8,902 X unique users active between 1 and 31 January 2025, connected through directed interaction ties.

Figure 9 presents the daily volume of X posts mentioning these keywords over the study period. Activity remains low for most of January and rises sharply in the days surrounding the M23 invasion into Goma, followed by a rapid decline. This temporal pattern indicates that attention on X is event-driven and short-lived, providing important context for the network analysis that follows.

Figure 10 visualises the full directed interaction network. Nodes represent user accounts, while edges (links) represent interaction types—who replies to, mentions, or amplifies whom—allowing the analysis to focus on amplification patterns rather than conversational exchange.

[74] Smith, M., Ceni A., Milic-Frayling, N., Shneiderman, B., Mendes Rodrigues, E., Leskovec, J., Dunne, C., (2010). NodeXL: a free and open network overview, discovery and exploration add-in for Excel 2007/2010/2013/2016 from the Social Media Research Foundation, https://smrfoundation.org

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Figure 10: Narrative network of Goma-Rwanda conflict in January 2025 on X.

As shown in Figure 10, the full network is characterised by strong centralisation combined with weak reciprocity. A quantitative measure for the strength of the division of a network into distinct communities or clusters is modularity. Despite relatively high modularity (0.49) – a network metric that captures the strength of community separation – more than half of all users belonged to a single large network component (the largest connected group of accounts in the dataset) dominated by a small number of influential accounts. Across the network, interaction is overwhelmingly broadcast-oriented: retweets and mentions vastly outnumber reciprocal exchanges, indicating that visibility is driven by cascade dynamics rather than dialogue. Retweet activity concentrated around these accounts, enabling sustained amplification of a narrow set of images and narratives.

When the network is grouped into clusters (Figure 11), these communities can be interpreted as distinct “communities of attention,” each playing a different role in shaping salience around the attack on Goma. The largest cluster (G1) operates as a high-volume distribution layer, dominated by automated or semi-automated news aggregation and link sharing. Its content is heavily link-driven, and its role is primarily to circulate information at scale rather than to frame or contest narratives. Other clusters are smaller and more topically focused, remixing similar news content but framing it through different political or regional lenses.

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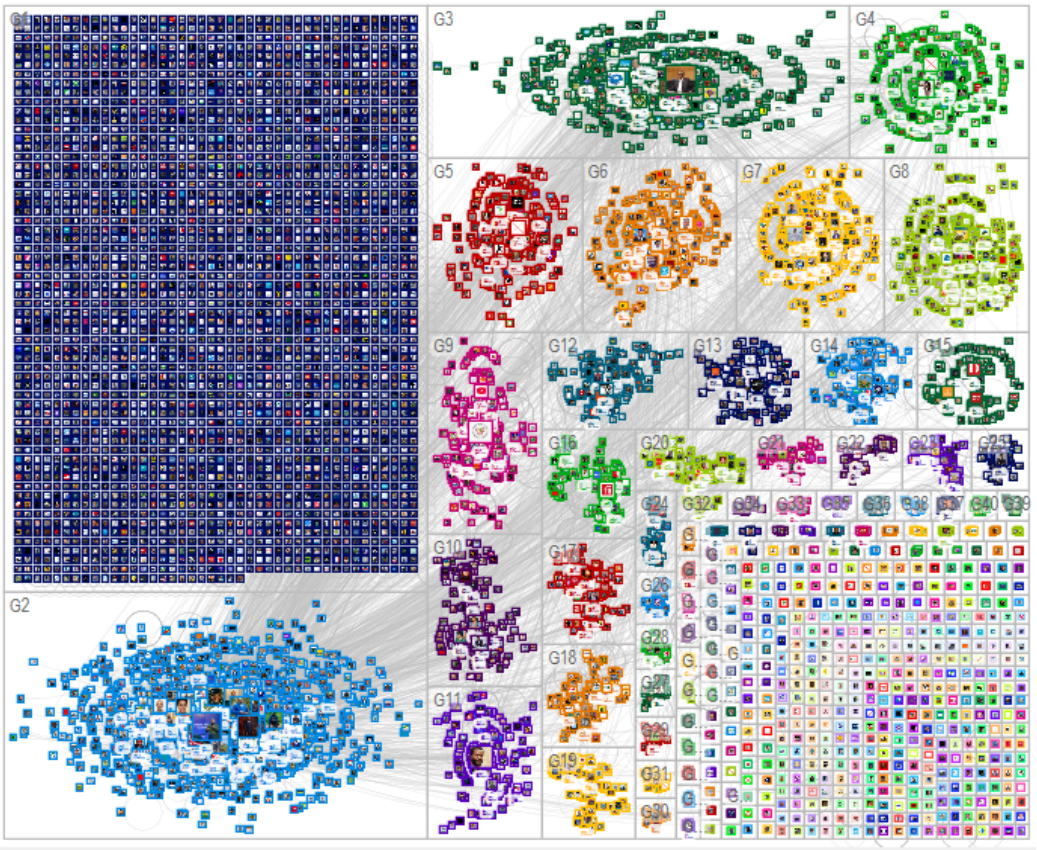

Figure 11: Interaction network of X unique users discussing "Rwanda" and "Goma" with top hashtags for each cluster, January 2025.

Clusters G2 and G3 occupy more interpretive positions but differ sharply in orientation. G2 centers on Congolese political communication, bringing together mainly Congolese state accounts, journalists, and regional commentators focused on sovereignty, military resistance to M23, and accusations against Rwanda. Although internally active, this cluster shows limited outward reach, confining much of this contestation to a relatively bounded audience.

G3, by contrast, is more strongly connected to international institutions, advocacy sources, and foreign-policy domains. It includes Rwandan president (Paul Kagame) and official state accounts and repeatedly amplifies material from international media and human-rights organisations, positioning it as a bridge between domestic debate and global diplomatic or normative framing.

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5.2.5 Unequal visibility

Pro-Rwanda state and state-adjacent accounts – primarily located in G3 in Figure 11 – ranked among the most central nodes by in-degree (number of links to a node) and betweenness centrality (how often a node acts as a bridge along the shortest path between other nodes in a network allowing them to act as hubs through which attention flows across clusters). These actors shape salience by anchoring narratives in diplomatic language, ceasefire announcements, and regional security frames following the M23 offensive.

By contrast, Congolese journalists and human right voices — most visible in G2 and smaller clusters such as G11— remained structurally peripheral, receiving replies and mentions rather than retweets. Critical reporting thus contributed information but rarely achieved comparable visibility.

References to human-rights actors in this analysis concern international human-rights organisations and humanitarian advocacy outlets rather than individual activists. These voices appear primarily in G3, G17, and G18, where shared content emphasises civilian harm, displacement, and legal accountability in relation to the M23 takeover of Goma. Despite their informational and normative importance, such content gains broader visibility mainly when amplified by highly central, broadcast-oriented accounts.

Overall, the findings show that while international media generated brief spikes of salience during acute crisis moments, networked amplification on X sustained and selectively redistributed salience beyond the news cycle, shaping longer-term perceptions of the conflict.

5.2.6 Information sources and salience formation

Across the full network (Figure 10) and within major clusters such as G1, G3, and G5 (Figure 11), the most visible URLs predominantly originate from established international media outlets (e.g. Reuters, AP, The Guardian, and The New York Times).This indicates that global news reporting provides the shared informational backbone of the conversation. Clusters differ less in the sources they cite than in how those sources are amplified: G1 maximises reach, G3 confers institutional legitimacy, while G2 embeds reporting within localised political contestation.

5.2.7 Language distribution and communicative scope

Interestingly, language use is highly skewed toward **French**, which accounts for approximately **65–70%** of posts, followed by **English** at around **20–25%**. All remaining content appears only marginally, indicating that discussion of the conflict in the eastern DRC on X is largely conducted within a francophone and anglophone communication space.

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5.2.8 Temporal dynamics and coordinated mobilisation

Notably, pro-Rwandan accounts were relatively less active in the immediate aftermath of the violence, contrasting with their rapid mobilisation in other coordinated campaigns such as #MadeInBelgium, #SanctionDRC, and #TshisekediIsKilling." This pattern suggests selective and strategic activation of attention, reinforcing the role of coordination and timing in shaping salience around the M23 invasion of Goma.

5.3 TTPs targeting information salience

TACTIC	TECHNIQUE
Image Management	Synthetic media; Sportswashing; Reframing; Visual or aesthetic framing using Gen-AI to modify or enhance visuals. Seeding content via influencer or partner accounts.
Flooding	AI-generated text[75]; Coordinated posting; High-volume posting; Hashtag saturation; Message repetition. Use LLMs for textual variants to evade detection and schedule mass posting during peak attention periods.
Narrative Capture	Oversimplification; Reframing using repeatable messages and pushing them into mainstream via retweets
Marginalisation	Trivialising (make something seem less important); Meme deployment; Ridicule; Narrative cycling; Harassment. Seeding diversionary or minimising content (memes) during high-visibility crises. Pairing this with attacks on critical authors/voices
Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior	Astroturfing (use of fake grassroots efforts); Sockpuppets (i.e. a false online identity used for deception); Reply storms; Account coordination. Using a mix of dedicated and personal accounts to coordinate timing and message templates. Amplifying content to inflate engagement and visibility

Table 4: TTPs targeting salience

75 Wack, et al (2024) 'Old Despots, New Tricks'

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6. The Diaspora – target and instrument of information suppression

The diaspora in Europe is deeply divided between pro-regime supporters and critics, with little neutral ground. Some members act as active promoters of the regime, lobbying institutions, shaping narratives, and silencing dissent. Others, particularly critics, face intimidation, harassment, and exclusion. This polarisation translates into two contrasting patterns of action and experience. In other words, part of the diaspora becomes an instrument for information suppression in Europe, while another part is the target of such suppression. In the following, we explore these two very different diasporas and how the Rwandan state relates to them.

6.1 Pro-regime diaspora as instruments of Kigali's influence

Rwanda's foreign information manipulation activities in Europe rely partly on segments of the diaspora who act as intermediaries, amplifiers, and community leaders. Rwanda has an explicit diaspora policy and a Diaspora Directorate General in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Apart from perceiving the diaspora as a source of investment and development, the Rwandan state positions the diaspora as 'Goodwill ambassadors' around the world (Turner 2013, Jones and Betts 2016, Orjuela 2023). The tactics described below show how influence and targeted pressure combine to consolidate the regime's informational advantages abroad.

6.1.1 Narrative consolidation through moral framing

Rwanda deploys a powerful moral framing anchored in genocide memory. By positioning itself as both survivor and guardian of international responsibility, the state strengthens its legitimacy and narrows the range of acceptable debate.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International note that genocide memory is frequently mobilised to frame political criticism as morally inappropriate or insensitive to historical trauma. Our interview material echoes those findings. One repondent explained that "if you criticise the government, people say you are disrespecting the genocide". Another stated: "there is only one acceptable narrative, and if you challenge it you become a problem".

This framing was also present around the April 2025 genocide commemoration at UNESCO in Paris, as described in the following vignette (box 6).

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Box 5: Using the genocide narrative to influence positions on the South Kivu conflict

The ongoing conflict in South Kivu in eastern DRC, marked by the M23 rebellion, Rwanda involvement, and heavy civilian toll, provides a critical backdrop for understanding how Rwanda deploys genocide memory to shape international narratives.

During the April 2025 genocide commemoration at UNESCO in Paris with the participation of Mairie de Paris and international human rights NGOs, the Rwandan ambassador framed Rwandans as victims in the South Kivu conflict and called on the international community to support Rwanda's position. Under the parole of 'never again', he argued that Rwanda was shouldering the international community's obligation to prevent genocide. This portrayal linked historic suffering to present-day claims, shifting the framing of responsibility for ongoing violence.

In parallel, the Rwandan diaspora in France successfully lobbied the Mairie de Paris to cancel a concert organised by famous artists in support of Congolese people in South Kivu. Their lobbying presented the event as problematic and succeeded in suppressing (for a time) a critical narrative.

6.1.2 Community capture and informal governance structures

A central component of Kigali's influence ecosystem in Europe operates through the capture and strategic alignment of diaspora community associations. These organisations are formally independent and often present themselves as cultural, commemorative, or community-building bodies. In practice, several appear to play a role in shaping community norms and messaging, policing internal boundaries of dissent and disseminating Kigali's preferred narratives. The Communauté Rwandaise de France (CRF), presented in the vignette below (box 7), illustrates this dynamic:

Box 6: The ambiguous status of the Communauté Rwandaise de France (CRF)

One example illustrating the blurred line between formal state-linked initiatives and informal diaspora mobilisation is the Communauté Rwandaise de France (CRF). Officially presented as an association intended to bring together the entire Rwandan community in France, the CRF in practice operates as a highly coordinated network aligned with Kigali's positions. Our observations and interviews suggest that the CRF plays a dual role. On the surface, it fosters community cohesion and cultural engagement. Beneath that, it disseminates talking points such as the conflict in South Kivu, providing members with specific language to adopt in public debates and online exchanges. It also mobilises

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members around key political narratives, coordinating supportive attendance at events featuring pro-regime figures. Finally, it acts as a mechanism for marginalising dissenting voices. Its proximity with the Embassy nurtures a climate of strict conformity in which critical voices are excluded.

In this way, the CRF exemplifies how nominally independent diaspora associations function as instruments of informal governance, extending Kigali's influence while maintaining plausible deniability regarding direct state control.

This logic extends beyond the CRF. Associations engaged in genocide remembrance and survivor representation, such as Ibuka or the Collectif des Parties Civiles pour le Rwanda (CPCR), operate with varying degrees of autonomy yet consistently align with Kigali's priorities. Their activities, through commemorations, community outreach, survivor advocacy, and legal mobilisation play a significant role in structuring the social and moral landscape of the diaspora. Through these associations, norms of acceptable speech are reinforced, and criticism of the government is often framed as disrespect towards survivors or as evidence of revisionist intent. The moral authority attached to these organisations amplifies their impact, making dissent more costly and isolating for individuals.

Together, these associations constitute a dense network of informal governance. They create a social environment in which narrative discipline is normalised, collective pressure regulates behaviour, and pro-regime mobilisation appears organic rather than directive.

6.1.3 Elite influence and agenda-setting

A key tactic involves shaping political and institutional agendas in Europe through proactive engagement by ambassadors and diaspora intermediaries. Forbidden Stories documents how Rwandan diplomats contact political offices and advocacy organisations to promote Kigali's preferred narratives, and in some cases exert pressure on officials who publicly criticise Rwanda. Our interviews reflect similar patterns. For instance, one respondent noted that "people linked to the [Rwandan] Embassy will contact organisers if an event may present Rwanda negatively", describing a strategy of shaping agendas to respond to criticism. Another respondent, who is a lawyer of Rwandan origin, proudly explained how he had succeeded in lobbying the French authorities to ban an event, organised in favour of the victims of the war in Congo.

Beyond direct engagement, Kigali also leverages the authority of sympathetic European figures to legitimise its narratives in public debate. A case in point is an event held in Paris in April 2025, titled "Peace in the Great Lakes region", organised by the CRF. The programme paired the Rwandan ambassador with prominent scholars from Europe and North America. Their participation conferred academic authority and neutrality, even as their conclusions

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aligned with Kigali's framing of the conflict in South Kivu. The presence and clear alignment with official narratives by French historian Vincent Duclert, head of the presidential commission on France's role during the genocide, exemplified how symbolic recognition within influential epistemic communities can amplify Rwanda's preferred interpretations.

Such dynamics appear clearly in official settings as well. For instance, the April 2025 hearing of the Rwandan ambassador before the French National Assembly illustrates how diplomatic platforms can be used to shape perceptions of Rwanda's regional role. During the session, the ambassador deployed a narrative centred on existential threat, historical moral authority, and the dismissal of international reporting, while an elected official of Rwandan origin intervened in support of this framing by questioning the credibility of evidence presented by the UN and several European governments. This alignment not only reinforced the ambassador's position but also helped steer the discussion towards Kigali's preferred interpretation of the crisis in the Great Lakes region.

A similar dynamic appears within multilateral organisations, where leadership positions provide powerful agenda-setting leverage. The Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), headed since 2019 by Louise Mushikiwabo, former foreign minister of Rwanda, offers a notable example. Despite its formal mandate to promote human rights, democratic governance, and the protection of fundamental freedoms across the francophone space, the OIF has remained silent on the human rights situation inside Rwanda, including on issues consistently raised by UN Special Procedures, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International.

6.2 Diasporas as prime targets of suppression

While the Rwandan state uses its diaspora as 'goodwill ambassadors' abroad, it also regards part of this population as problematic. One high ranking official openly talked about the 'negative diaspora' (Turner 2013). This diaspora is dismissed as genocidaires who are not able or willing to see the progress that the country has made since 1994. While the government in Kigali has no hope that they will change their minds, the state is targeting the youth, born in exile trying to convince them to leave their parents' ideologies[76].

Interviews conducted in Paris suggest that official narratives shape how different groups within the diaspora are perceived. Families who fled in the immediate aftermath of the genocide, and especially their children, are often viewed through the lens of inherited suspicion, while more recent political exiles are framed not as génocidaires but as actors whose dissent is motivated by personal ambition or strategic interest. Across these different categories of exiles, the

[76] Turner, S. (2013). "Staging the Rwandan Diaspora: The Politics of Performance." African Studies 72 (2): 265–84; Orjuela, C. (2025). The 'ideal citizen' abroad: engaging Rwanda's young generation diaspora. Globalizations, 22(1), 34–50.

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Rwandan state engages in systematic efforts to monitor, intimidate, and silence critics in Europe (Rwanda Classified). These tactics operate across physical, digital, legal, and psychological domains, contributing to a pervasive climate of fear within diaspora communities.

6.2.1 Transnational repression and intimidation

Interviewees report experiencing pressure, including incidents they describe as intimidation or surveillance. Although physical attacks in Europe appear less frequent, the perception of vulnerability is widespread. For instance, some interviewees expressed fear of poisoning.

Pressure is frequently exerted through relatives or professional networks. Employers may receive anonymous phone calls labelling them as genociders, while smear campaigns on social media target both individuals and their families. Exclusion from diaspora associations and community events creates further isolation. One respondent explained that representatives of the embassy would call her workplace and warn her employer that she was a genocider.

Returning to Rwanda can also be made deliberately difficult. Obtaining documents or permissions is often obstructed, creating practical barriers that discourage critics from travelling back.

Families inside Rwanda face direct pressure. Relatives of government critics report intimidation, close surveillance, and visits being filmed and circulated on social media to signal their exposure. For instance, content creator Kasuku recorded himself confronting a woman whose brother is an opposition figure abroad and urging her to denounce him. The Rwandan Minister of Youth publicly supported such practice and encouraged confrontation with people labelled as enemies of the state and critics of the President. This type of public encouragement reinforces fear and heightens the vulnerability of relatives associated with dissidents.

Such tactics ensure that opposition voices abroad are silenced not only through personal harassment but also through threats and intimidation directed at their loved ones still living in Rwanda. Even when evidence is inconclusive, these perceptions reshape behaviour and reduce mobilisation

Box 7: Portrait of Dieudonné[77], a Rwandan human rights activist in France

When meeting for the interview, Laurent arrived carrying his laptop, explaining that he always takes it with him in case his home is searched during his absence. A lawyer by training and president of a small human rights association in France, he was forced to flee

[77] Pseudonym.

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Rwanda in 2014 after harassment linked to his participation in international human rights meetings. Granted asylum in France, he continues to speak out but faces constant threats and insults, which he believes originate from Kigali and its embassy.

His family in Rwanda is regularly intimidated, and he cannot return to visit them. One of his sons died in Belgium under suspicious circumstances, deepening his sense of insecurity. “It is impossible for me to communicate with my family in Rwanda. I cannot return, and they are regularly threatened,” he says.

The climate of intimidation extends into the diaspora community itself. “There is constant mistrust within the Rwandan community. During funerals, people are afraid to be seen with me” Laurent confides. Social isolation compounds the pressure, as community members avoid him at public or private events, fearing repercussions for being associated with him.

6.2.2 Surveillance narratives and infiltration

Many critics believe diaspora networks are infiltrated by pro-regime informants. Interviewees repeatedly stated that “meetings quickly reach the embassy” or that “you never know who is reporting”. Forbidden Stories similarly reports that embassy-linked actors attend events and monitor critical groups. A member of the Rwandan diaspora in Denmark confided in us that he was approached by the Rwandan embassy in Sweden, covering the Scandinavian countries, asking him to monitor the activities of Rwandans in Denmark. He politely turned down the offer. Whether or not all claims are accurate, the perception itself contributes to self-censorship and distrust.

6.2.3 Delegitimising diaspora opponents and targeted accusations

Delegitimisation is central to Rwanda’s suppression strategy. Forbidden Stories describes systematic portrayals of dissidents and journalists as “revisionists”, “genocide deniers”, or “supporters of genocidaires”. These labels are particularly powerful in European contexts where sensitivity to genocide crimes is high.

Interviewees confirm the prevalence of this tactic. One respondent explained: “whatever you say, they say you deny the genocide”. Another reported that opponents are immediately labelled genociders, irrespective of their actual beliefs. Such accusations shape public perceptions and inhibit policymakers from engaging with critical voices.

Digital harassment is a prominent method of silencing critics. Interviewees describe consistent experiences of such harassment, attacking any dissenting voices across social media

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platforms. One explained that “thirty or forty accounts attack you when you post something”. Another spoke of prolonged intimidation campaigns designed to exhaust or silence critics.

6.2.4 Legal mobilisation as a coercive narrative tool

Diaspora organisations with close ties to Kigali, such as the Collectif des Parties Civiles pour le Rwanda and Ibuka, conduct campaigns to identify alleged genociders residing abroad and initiate judicial proceedings against them. These initiatives often address serious crimes and fulfil legitimate judicial objectives, yet they also operate as powerful narrative instruments. By ensuring that the genocide remains the primary frame through which Rwanda enters public and institutional debate, they reduce the visibility of issues relating to governance, civil liberties, or extraterritorial repression. This narrative saturation produces a moral hierarchy in which criticism of the current government risks being interpreted as revisionism or as evidence of “genocidal mentality”.

Strategic litigation complements this approach. Pro-government actors have supported cases against alleged “genocide supporters” or deniers, including against French journalists, see section on Dissemination p 23-24. Their selective application reinforces the idea that dissent equates to moral deviance. Interviewees described how accusations of genocide ideology function as a deterrent, with one critic explaining: “they want you to know they could take you to court if you continue”. Legal threats thus serve outward-facing aims, reasserting Rwanda’s moral positioning, and inward-facing aims, discouraging criticism within the diaspora and silencing opposing narratives.

6.3 State-controlled or community-led?

It is difficult to ascertain how much of this intimidation of the diaspora is controlled and coordinated from Kigali, or whether pro-regime actors abroad receive direct instructions from the capital. One respondent reported belonging to a WhatsApp group that circulated guidance from RPF-linked actors based in Kigali. Others described their engagement as voluntary, rooted in a belief that they were contributing to national protection and development. A third group framed their mobilisation in emotional terms, emphasising admiration for President Kagame and gratitude for what they regard as his role in ending the genocide in 1994.

This ambiguity is not incidental but structural. It enables Kigali to exert influence within the diaspora while maintaining plausible deniability, as control operates primarily through social norms, communal expectations, and the symbolic legitimacy of community and survivor organisations rather than explicit state instruction. Responsibility remains diffuse, yet the perception of potential surveillance and retaliation generates a powerful chilling effect, leading to widespread self-censorship.

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At the same time, the absence of clear chains of command encourages pro-regime actors to over-perform. Anticipation, loyalty, and affective attachment substitute for formal coordination, allowing monitoring and harassment to occur without direct orders.

6.4 TTPs targeting the diaspora

TACTIC	TECHNIQUE
Narrative control and moral framing	Community capture and informal governance structures; Turning up at events organised by opposition.
	Dissemination of talking points through allied organisations;
	Organising seminars, memorials, etc
	Support pro-regime figures.
Elite influence and agenda-setting	Favouring pro-regime European figures;
	Hearings with politicians (especially regarding war in DRC)
	Diaspora-aligned lobbying to frame political agendas.
Transnational repression and intimidation	Targeting diaspora members and their families with threats and intimidation manoeuvres. Contacting French/Belgian employers of government critics, warning them.
	(Coordinated) online harassment and silencing
	Delegitimising diaspora opponents and targeted accusations**;** Narrative policing by survivor organisations (e.g. Ibuka, CFR)
	Legal mobilisation as a coercive narrative tool. Strategic litigation and legal intimidation, including legal cases against genocide suspects

Table 5: TTPs targeting the diaspora

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7. Conclusion

The dynamics analysed in this report can inform:

(1) **The EU Action Plan on FIMI**, by showing how a smaller partner country like Rwanda uses coordinated online campaigns, diaspora mobilisation, and moral framing to shape narratives inside Europe, precisely the types of hybrid influence the FIMI framework aims to detect and counter.

(2) **The EU's Anti-SLAPP Directive and the EU Victims' Rights Strategy**, as the intimidation, legal pressure, and coordinated harassment targeting journalists, researchers, and diaspora critics in Europe mirror the kinds of abusive proceedings and cross-border threats these instruments seek to address.

(3) **(3) The EU's Great Lakes Regional Strategy**, illustrating how Rwanda's information control supports its regional positioning, affects conflict narratives, and complicates EU engagement on governance, security, and human-rights monitoring in the Great Lakes region.

Rwanda's information-management environment operates as an integrated, multi-layered process that structures increasingly visibility in addition to suppressing the production and dissemination of information. This system functions transnationally, linking domestic legal controls, and transnational pressure mechanisms with digital salience management and diaspora mobilisation to project an image of a progressive, developed nation while rendering critical perspectives costly, marginal, and illegitimate.

At the level of information production, suppression is enabled by a dense legal architecture that criminalises speech deemed "sectarian" or "divisionist." Although framed as safeguards for national unity and genocide prevention, these laws lack the procedural and substantive safeguards required under international human-rights standards and are frequently applied in ways that intimidate academics, journalists, and political opponents. These legal constraints are reinforced by bureaucratic barriers that limit access for foreign researchers and journalists, as well as by surveillance practices—including the documented use of spyware—that further deter independent inquiry. As discussed in Section 1, these constraints generate a chilling effect that limits not only what information is published, but what questions are asked in the first place.

Information control extends beyond production to the dissemination of information, where critical voices are systematically discredited through accusations of genocide denial or colonial bias. Information that challenges official narratives is blocked, removed, or discredited through media regulation, website blocking, and the instrumentalisation of

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complaint mechanisms. The reaction to the *Forbidden Stories* investigation, first introduced in Section 2, illustrates how information dissemination is restricted through coordinated discrediting rather than outright bans, with complaint mechanisms and regulatory powers leveraged to suppress international reporting, including the banning of BBC Kinyarwanda broadcasts. Together, these practices contribute to a highly polarised public sphere in which dissent is framed not as legitimate political disagreement, but as a moral transgression or a threat to national security.

However, suppression does not end where access formally remains open. As demonstrated in Section 3, Rwanda increasingly control information through salience management: shaping what becomes visible, emotionally resonant, and algorithmically amplified in digital spaces even by using AI-assisted tools. Rather than relying on internet shutdowns or overt censorship, the regime and aligned networks flood social media with positive imagery, patriotic aesthetics, and ridicule-based framing that marginalises dissent. Critical voices remain present but peripheral, overwhelmed by coordinated attention dynamics that privilege regime narratives that are mostly centred on development, tourism, sports, and presidential leadership. This strategy depends not only on automation and coordination, but also on voluntary participation by individuals seeking safety, status, or belonging.

Finally, the diaspora emerges as both a target and an instrument of this system. As shown in Section 4, diaspora communities in Europe are incorporated into Rwanda's information control strategy through moral framing, community capture, elite lobbying, and informal governance structures. Pro-regime actors extend Kigali's narratives into European political, academic, and civic spaces, while critics face intimidation, exclusion, and reputational attacks. At the same time, dissenting members of the diaspora are subjected to transnational repression, including digital harassment, social exclusion, and threats directed at family members in Rwanda. In this way, diaspora dynamics bridges domestic information control and international perception management, reinforcing earlier stages of production, dissemination, and salience control.

Taken together, these four dimensions reveal a model of information suppression that is subtle, adaptive, and externally oriented. Rwanda's case complicates dominant policy understandings of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), which tend to focus on large powers, disinformation, or technological disruption. Instead, it highlights how a smaller state can shape international perception through legal ambiguity, moral authority, networked amplification, and diaspora mobilisation.

For European policymakers, journalists, and researchers, the implication is clear: engaging with Rwanda requires attention not only to **what information circulates**, but to **how visibility is structured**, **who bears the cost of dissent**, and **which narratives are**

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rendered legitimate or unsayable. Without such an integrated perspective, well-intentioned actors risk reproducing the very asymmetries this paper seeks to expose.

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8. Summary of TTPs

	TACTIC	TECHNIQUE
PRODUCTION	Limiting access to the country to independent journalists and researchers	Leverage strict requirements to secure research permits and visas. Making requirements difficult to fulfil (for example, requesting list of interviewees be regularly shared with the authorities; requesting multiple printed copies of documentations; requiring multiple visits to the country before permits can be secured)
		Foster uncertainty throughout in-country visits: Use arbitrariness at border to refuse entry despite secured permits and visa
	Limit access to data	Restrict access to survey data or census data: Leverage the exemptions built in the right to information law
		Share only positive data about the country: Manipulate figures by changing how they are calculated to make them more positive
	Monitor activities of journalists and researchers	Deploy surveillance software to monitor the activities of critics, including journalists. Infect devices or the devices of their contacts in the country
		Rely on the local contacts of journalists and researchers. Threaten or pay fixers or local organisation
		Leverage requirements attached to research permits Requests research notes; interviewees lists
DISSEMINATION	Discredit critics	Online campaigns to attack the character of those who produce knowledge or information. Create websites; use coordinated social media accounts and AI to generate large quantity of content attacking individuals
		Leverage networks of supporters abroad to co-sign open letters and petitions
	Leverage complaint mechanisms	Aligned actors accuse critics of denying the genocide by filing complaints to control insntances, or filing lawsuits

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SALIENCE	Image Management	Synthetic media; Sportswashing; Reframing; Visual or aesthetic framing using Gen-AI to modify or enhance visuals. Seeding content via influencer or partner accounts.
	Flooding	AI-generated text[78]; Coordinated posting; High-volume posting; Hashtag saturation; Message repetition. Use LLMs for textual variants to evade detection and schedule mass posting during peak attention periods.
	Narrative Capture	Oversimplification; Reframing using repeatable messages and pushing them into mainstream via retweets
	Marginalisation	Trivialising (make something seem less important); Meme deployment; Ridicule; Narrative cycling; Harassment. Seeding diversionary or minimising content (memes) during high-visibility crises. Pairing this with attacks on critical authors/voices
	Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior	Astroturfing (use of fake grassroots efforts); Sockpuppets (i.e. a false online identity used for deception); Reply storms; Account coordination. Using a mix of dedicated and personal accounts to coordinate timing and message templates. Amplifying content to inflate engagement and visibility
DIASPORA	Narrative control and moral framing	Community capture and informal governance structures; Turning up at events organised by opposition.
		Dissemination of talking points through allied organisations;
		Organising seminars, memorials, etc
		Support pro-regime figures.
	Elite influence and agenda-setting	Favouring pro-regime European figures;
		Hearings with politicians (especially regarding war in DRC)
		Diaspora-aligned lobbying to frame political agendas.
	Transnational repression and intimidation	Targeting diaspora members and their families with threats and intimidation manoeuvres. Contacting French/Belgian employers of government critics, warning them.
		(Coordinated) online harassment and silencing

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	Delegitimising diaspora opponents and targeted accusations; Narrative policing by survivor organisations (e.g. Ibuka, CFR)
	Legal mobilisation as a coercive narrative tool. Strategic litigation and legal intimidation, including legal cases against genocide suspects

Table 6: Summary of TTPs

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