

Building on the Past: Media Ethics in Rwanda's Evolving Post-Genocide Society

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July 1st, 2012. Perched on an elevated media platform, ten feet or so above ground, 50 local and foreign journalists, including myself, marvel at the buzz of the National Amahoro Stadium. A celebration of Rwanda's 50 years of freedom from colonial rule, over 30,000 people fill the stands. Crowds of people dance, raise their palms to the sky, and turn their wrists to the rhythms of the African drums. Laughter, cheers, and biblical hymns fill the atmosphere. At 103 degrees Fahrenheit, my black camera body is starting to heat up and the weight of the day is setting in.

For Rwanda, July 1st is not simply joyous. Rather, it serves as a reminder of the challenges and lives lost during the past 50 years. The date itself falls within the period of 100 days, during which the country's 1994 genocide against the Tutsis saw the mass slaughtering of over 800,000 people.


On a personal level, July 1st is rather somber as well; it is the day I lost my dad two years ago. The day I received that phone call that he had a heart attack, and that our disagreement the night before would forever go unsettled. As I returned to university that fall, I wondered how to best learn from my tumultuous relationship with my dad in the persistent unrelenting continuation of time. I clung to friendships, often restrictive and unhealthy, that led me to neglect myself and to struggle to keep up with the world around me. When I applied to intern in Rwanda for the summer to examine media ethics in a post-genocide nation, I was myself trying to discover the road to recovery. For the past 18 years, Rwanda has faced this exact challenge.

The sea of yellow, blue and green flags, present through my camera's viewfinder, emphasizes the progress of Rwanda's reunified populace. Bright white smiles on the dark African faces seem to reflect an overall optimism in the country. But the slice of time, captured in each zoomed-in photograph, allows me to notice the concealed gashes and mutilated

limbs of people throughout the crowd. The camouflaged soldiers, guns erect, positioned at every seating section, spur doubt about the country's stability in my mind. I press my thigh against the metal railing of the media platform, and the seemingly secure structure, wrapped in fabrics and curled ribbons, starts to rattle.

As an American journalism student, my perception of the media in general lies in its ability to hold society accountable for its past and to provide context for its present. Entering my internship at *The New Times*, Rwanda's first English and largest daily newspaper, I hoped to gain a deep understanding of the country's accomplishments and challenges since 1994. The Independence Day festivities, which filled the pages of the newspaper the next day, added to the growing stack of experiences I compiled on my desk at *The New Times*.

What I learned is that in order to grasp the reality of Rwanda, I needed to look at the media through which I was seeing it. How do the remnants of the genocide impact print journalism ethics today? To that end, I first analyze the historical context of the country's media censorship. Through the lens of the media, I then examine the current state of affairs in Rwanda, and how its past informs its present. Lastly, I use my experiences in the local press and as an American student to examine the possible implications of Rwanda's



silenced opposition. The implications of censorship on Rwanda's future are yet to be determined but the impact of the past on Rwanda today is arguably hard to deny.

Out of Focus: the Media and the Genocide

June 6th, 2012. In Rwanda, the night sky is blinding. With few streetlights and minimal skyscrapers even in the country's capital of Kigali, it is hard to make out the "land of a thousand hills." The view from my oval plane window gives little insight into the journey ahead in my eight-week summer internship. The only image I can muster of Rwanda is its past.

I look at the people around me.
Who is Hutu? Who is Tutsi?
Would I even be able to tell?

Up until this point, my perception of Rwanda was colored by documentaries and photographs of the pervasive destruction that existed during the time of the genocide. Bodies covered in blood, mutilated limbs, women raped and children crying. People running for their lives from their neighbors. I imagine the corpses strewn along the roads, and the journalists reporting no other option than to drive over them.¹

From the research I've done, violence seems to be a recurring theme in Rwanda; ethnic uprisings have happened continuously throughout the second half of the 20th century. The 1994 conflict, one of the largest atrocities in Africa's recent history, was the result of deep-rooted tension between the country's two largest ethnic groups. The Hutu, who are the ethnic majority – 84 percent

of the population – were typically the agriculturalists and the country's working class while the Tutsi – who comprised 15 percent of Rwanda's population – were known as the pastoralists. The Tutsi were often more educated, wealthier and as a result, held more leadership positions.

Relations between the Hutu and Tutsi, however, were generally peaceful until colonists first arrived in Rwanda in 1897.² Influenced first by the Germans in an 1890 Brussels agreement, and then by the Belgians in the 1923 League of Nations Mandate,³ Rwandans became increasingly more aware of race.⁴ This was a time when, on a global scale, humankind was preoccupied with the "scientific measures of race." Europeans were experimenting with brain-measuring devices that would soon be used to classify the Jews in the Holocaust. American courts were approving eugenic sterilization laws, and Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes famously argued in the case *Buck v. Bell* (1927), "It is better for all the world if ...society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind."⁵ The Belgian colonialists occupying Rwanda started to use the racial classification techniques of their Western brethren, aimed at eroding the unity that once existed between the Hutus and the Tutsis.

From the 1930s up until the 1990s, newspapers in Rwanda depicted Hutus as short and stout with wider noses and darker skin tones, while Tutsis were quite the opposite. Their taller physiques, willingness to convert to Roman Catholicism, lighter skin tones, and ethnic origins in the Horn of Africa were considered to be "more European" than the Hutus.⁶

Walking across the tarmac, at the rather basic East African airport, I look at the people around me. Who is Hutu? Who

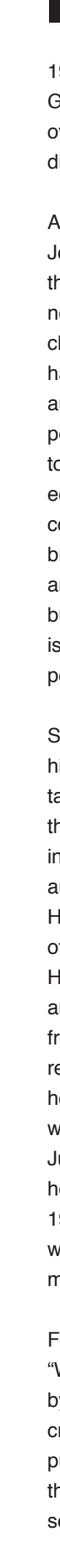
is Tutsi? Would I even be able to tell? "Presumably not," a Rwandan student explained to me when I got back from the summer. He cited increased intermarriage between Hutus and Tutsis, and between Rwandans and foreigners,⁷ that makes it difficult to categorize people according to old ethnic classifications.

Next to me, rolling a rickety black suitcase, an elegant dark-skinned lady in her 60s clings to the hand of a white man walking on her other side. The man, her husband, is the same elderly Norwegian gentleman who sat next to me on the plane. In our conversation, he told me they got married five years ago and that this is her first time back to her home country in 18 years. I presume her time away had something to do with the genocide. In fact, he disclosed to me, 25 members of her immediate family were killed. She was gang-raped and beaten repeatedly.

I watch her hands shake uncontrollably. We are approaching the customs checkpoint in the main airport terminal. In Rwanda's colonial era, everyone was mandated to carry identification cards signifying their race. Today, as demonstrated by the documents tightly grasped in the woman's hand, I notice everyone is Rwandan. Bringing up ethnicity with locals is precarious, according to the book, "Customs and Culture of Rwanda."⁸ I still can't help but wonder who is who.

"What are you doing here?" the woman asks me, trying to take her mind off of her nerves. I hesitate to tell her I'm working for a newspaper. I don't know yet what people in Rwanda think about local journalists today. All I know is that the media is blamed for the violence that occurred.

Throughout modern history, media has played a significant role in perpetuating genocides. When Hitler rose to power in



1933, his head of communication Joseph Goebbels capitalized on the Nazi control over the media and used it as a means for disseminating hate.⁹

A descendant of Russian and Polish Jewish immigrants who fled their homes in the 1920s to escape persecution, I have never fully understood the idea of ethnic cleansing, and how the human conscience has allowed it to happen. Amos Elon, author of “The Pity of It All,” explains that people in Germany were susceptible to Nazi propaganda because of the economic and political devastation the country experienced in World War I. Hitler brought new unified hope to the country, and Jews, who were often prominent business owners, sources of envy and an isolated ethnic minority, gave Germany a population to rally against.¹⁰

Similarly, in Rwanda many Tutsis held high positions that made them accessible targets. Movements of decolonization throughout Africa in the 1950s and ’60s intensified Hutu resentment of Tutsi authority and power struggles led to a Hutu uprising in 1959 that killed hundreds of Tutsis and exiled over 300,000 more. Hutus declared the country a republic, and Rwanda gained independence from colonialism in a formal 1962 U.N. referendum. Ethnically motivated violence, however, continued up into the 1970s when Hutu militia appointed Major General Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu himself, as head of the republic.¹¹ Under his reign, the 1962 constitution changed multiple times, with specific attention to the country’s media laws.¹²

Founded in 1987, *Kanguka* (meaning “Wake up!”) was a newspaper published by a Tutsi and edited by a Hutu, openly critical of the country’s president. The publication presented a strong objective threat to the government because it was seen as balanced from both ethnic sides.

In 1990, President Habyarimana’s wife Agathe and other extremist Hutu military officials realized that they needed to weaken the influence of *Kanguka*. They bribed the Hutu editor of the publication to quit and help them start an opposing paper called *Kangura* (meaning “Wake them up!”). That year, *Kangura* published “The Ten Commandments for the Hutu,” telling Hutus that by marrying, hiring, or befriending a Tutsi they would be “traitors” to their own ethnicity.

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“Oh.” She pauses, turning around in the line to look at me. She adjusts the silk scarf in the collar of her beige blazer. “That’s a very nice newspaper,” she adds. I wonder what she means by “nice.”


My motivation to intern at *The New Times* was twofold: to gain the most access and largest reach from a newspaper widely disseminated and highly influential within the country, and to examine how successful the newspaper is in implementing its mission. Founded in 1995, in a climate of despair and great vulnerability, the newspaper, as stated on its website, aims to bring “fair and balanced reporting without any confrontational tones, political or otherwise” to the people of Rwanda.¹³ The urgent need for objectivity post-genocide was dire, but the damage of the country’s slanted media and the extent that it needed repair was vast.

Newspapers in the early 1990s, regardless of political and ethnic backings, dehumanized the “other.” In 1990, government officials, concerned about the unwieldy media, made an appeal to the press on Radio Rwanda to be

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“responsible” with the content that they published.¹⁴ Throughout the early 1990s, the U.S. and Belgian embassies offered ethical training seminars for Rwandan journalists to dissuade them from using the media to propagate hate. Journalists at the time did not typically have college degrees or professional training; as a result, many newspaper editors were military officials with a vested interest in promoting their political beliefs. After warnings to the Rwandan press went unheeded, the government’s information office, Service Central de Renseignements, called a meeting with journalists to introduce new media laws, which placed numerous restrictions. These censors prevented newspapers from writing about religion, regionalism, and the president and his family. In essence, they stifled any anti-government view.



While a director for Rwanda's Bureau of Information and Broadcasting established an association of journalists to allegedly "protect the interests of the press," opposition journalists knew that the reality of the association was that it gave government officials an avenue through which to silence them and influence their content.¹⁵ President Habyarimana eventually liberalized the media again before 1994, but the continued political backing *Kangura* received amplified the voices of the Hutu over the Tutsi, giving them an easier ability to propagate their messages of ethnic cleansing.¹⁶

In February 1994, just before President Habyarimana was assassinated in a plane crash, the Hutu publication printed an article warning, "We know where the cockroaches are. If they look for us, they had better watch out." With the loss of the president, and the fiery hate speech across the media, ethnic violence erupted and the 100-day genocide ensued. Eight hundred thousand people were killed.¹⁷ Radio stations and newspapers encouraged Hutus to identify and slaughter their Tutsi neighbors. Machetes, the main tools of violence, brought the country into turmoil. While the mass annihilations were taking place, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a Tutsi-dominated militia group exiled in Uganda, increased in strength and waged a war inside Rwanda against the Hutus in power. Paul Kagame, at the helm of the RPF, won control he has held ever since.¹⁸

Double Exposure: Rwanda Today

June 11th, 2012. A light-skinned African woman in heels and a black business dress suit stands at the back of the church. Her left hand wraps around her right. Her mouth gapes open as she scans the space. Through my wide-angle lens I capture the scene. The church is in Nyamata, a town approximately 30

minutes out of Kigali, and one of the areas hit hardest in the genocide.

There is nothing redeeming about this church. In 1994 it is estimated that over 10,000 people were burned alive in it.¹⁹ Grenade holes mark the outside walls and concrete mass graves line the church's courtyard. Inside the relatively small redbrick building, a plaster plaque of the Virgin Mary is illuminated by a single streak of sunlight. Her expression is wrought with disappointment. Religious leaders told people they would be safe here, that the church would be a place of refuge for them during the genocide. But 40 long wooden pews are piled high with clothes and broken promises. Crumpled and fading in color, the garments once draped the bodies of people killed in the area, and represent the lingering sentiments of shock and betrayal.

The woman walks slowly to the altar, examining the pews as she passes them. Each step she takes echoes on the concrete floor. I try to be discreet as I photograph her, so as not to disturb her moments of reflection. Yet the scene is new for me too. It is my first day on the job as a photography intern for *The New Times*, and the chill of the church's past provides a stark contrast to the promise of the country's future. After all, watching the World Health Organization (WHO) officials examine Rwanda's improving healthcare system earlier in the day was rather inspiring.

Unlike the church, frozen in a moment of time, healthcare in Rwanda is continually progressing. Life expectancy at birth has gone up in the past 10 years, from 48 to 58.²⁰ An estimated 94 percent of HIV/AIDS patients are able to receive the anti-retroviral drugs they need to survive.²¹ Unlike America, Rwanda has universal health insurance. The system

covers 92 percent of the population, and premiums are an average of \$2 per visit.²²

Touring the hospitals and healthcare clinics with the WHO officials, I witnessed the positive outcomes because of it. Women, pre-registered in maternity health programs, cradled babies against their exposed bosoms for warmth; infant mortality rates in the country have dropped significantly between 2000 and 2010.²³ Local physicians work collaboratively with American, French, and Belgian doctors to care for patients, who are wrapped in colorful African fabrics, each with their own metal hospital bed. According to a *New York Times* interview with Peter Drobac, Rwanda country director for Partners in Health, "[The country's] health gains in the last decade are among the most dramatic the world has seen in the last 50 years."²⁴

While the fluorescent bulbs in the church are dim and the streaks of summer sun coming through the windows do little to assuage the church's chilling past, I find optimism in my pictures of Rwanda today. In a 2009 broadcast CNN reporter Fareed Zakaria called Rwanda "Africa's biggest success story"²⁵ – but he wasn't just referring to its health care. Gross domestic product has increased significantly over the past 10 years; private investment is growing, and Starbucks and Costco now buy about a quarter of Rwanda's yearly coffee crop.²⁶ With regard to gender and opportunity, 56 percent of members of Parliament are female²⁷ and the average attendance rate in public schools is 97 percent for both boys and girls.²⁸ What's more, in a 2011 Gallup poll²⁹ 92 percent of Rwandans said they feel safe walking alone on the streets at night. Though many may attribute this to the police state and authoritarian leadership style of the country's current president, Paul Kagame, the government certainly deserves credit for the positive impact it has had on Rwanda's ability to rebuild and progress.

A Close Up: New President, New Times

July 19th, 2012. I am pushed from all directions. To my right and left, fellow photojournalists, working for Rwandan and other African newspapers capture the scene. Inside a semicircle of bubbling nursing students in their mid-20s from the Rwamagana Nursing School, President Paul Kagame and former U.S. President Bill Clinton wrap their arms around each other and smile.³⁰ Everything about the scene is posed. The 50-something-year-old woman photographing for The Clinton Health Access Initiative, a former photo editor for *USA Today* and a close acquaintance of the Clintons, flags her hands to position the students. My experiences photographing and editing for several American newspapers have trained me to think that photojournalism at its best is candid, that an image unaltered by the presence of the photographer has an ability to better reflect reality. I hesitate to capture the head-on shot of the diplomats, but I know it is the kind of front-page photo *The New Times* is looking for.

The New Times was founded to serve the Rwandan refugees, over a million in number, who returned to the country post-genocide speaking English. Whether explicitly or implicitly stated, however, there were seemingly additional advantages to introducing an English press. Most returnees still knew the local language of Kinyarwanda. Even still, the English media, starting with *The New Times* offered the country a more neutral language on which to build its recovery.³¹

At the time of the genocide, the predominant language, in addition to Kinyarwanda, was French (a remnant of Belgian colonialism). France, hoping to preserve its language foothold in Africa, offered military support to countries that institutionalized French, and thus aided the extremist Hutu government in the country's

1994 genocide. What's more, as this happened America did nothing.

Eighteen years later, I watch awe-struck Rwandan students crowd around to shake hands with the remarkably thin and rather wrinkled former U.S. president. I had encountered Bill Clinton before in my life; my father worked in politics for the large majority of my childhood. At this moment, however, watching him face students directly traumatized by the 1994 Rwandan genocide, which took place at the time of his presidency, I can't help but think he looks a lot older. Clinton's apology to the people of Rwanda on March 25th, 1998, felt to me like empty words. But as one photographer for a larger East African newspaper explains to me, "It was more than other countries offered."

Though French was taught in Rwandan schools up until 2008, that year the government made a decision to replace it with English. The reason, explained the country's trade and industry minister, Vincent Karega, was that "English has emerged as a backbone for growth and development not only in the region but around the globe." While this shift in the institution of language came several years after the establishment of *The New Times*, post-genocide aid from the U.S. and the U.K. in the country came almost immediately. *The New Times* decision to print in English set a foundation on which Rwanda could further develop relationships with these global powers.

Following the genocide, the Rwandan government strictly controlled the media. In order to start a newspaper it had to be approved by the government, and the messages needed to be filtered. According to an interview with a former journalist in the country, this censorship was greatly welcomed by the people right after the genocide. "The country was in such a vulnerable place. We didn't want to go


back to the days of hate speech and a biased media."³² A Rwandan student at the university I attend in America agreed that, "Restricting the media after the genocide had meaning." He stressed, however, that, "Keeping media as it was back then right after 1994 means nothing today."

The stakes of journalism are incredibly high in Rwanda at present. In 2002 the Media High Council was established by the government to preserve the country's freedom of press, though today its mission, according to the Council's website, includes "Promoting freedom, responsibility and professionalism of the media."

While these changes in its goal seem minimal, a media bill passed in 2009 mandates that journalists must now show educational credentials and a clean criminal record in order to work in the profession, both which they receive from the government. In addition, media outlets must pay high licensing fees in order to operate and print. Strict penalties exist for publications that endorse or deny the country's 1994 genocide, "incite discrimination," or "show contempt for the president."³³ Several journalists have been arrested on such grounds.

The Committee to Protect Journalists confirms two arrests of journalists in 2011 for violations of free speech, though many more are believed to fit the category.³⁴ That same year two independent newspapers, *Umuseso* and *Umuwugizi*, were disbanded for "posing a risk to national security," and the editor of *Umuwugizi* fled Rwanda for fear of being assassinated.³⁵ He was shot dead outside of his home later that year.

The opposition today does not seem ethnically driven. A former Rwandan journalist now living in Canada confirms that editors and reporters for both publications were Tutsi and Hutu, some were even ethnically mixed. This is also



confirmed by the book “Media and The Rwandan Genocide,” which goes so far as to identify *Umuseso* reporters as former soldiers for Kagame’s RPF party.³⁶

The image of Kagame is highly crafted. His face hangs in every storefront and public space throughout Rwanda. I zoom in to watch his casual interactions with the Clintons.

I learned this summer that not even a publication like *The New Times*, with its strong allegiance to the president’s office, can escape the government’s watchful eye. When I contacted the newspaper last September about a summer internship, a man named Joseph Bideri was the managing director and editor-in-chief of *The New Times*. Arrested on November 14th, 2011, he was interrogated for the newspaper’s coverage of alleged government malpractices. Though he was ultimately released from prison, he was banned from returning to the newspaper, and by the time I arrived for my internship a new editor had filled the position.³⁷

In a recent journalism class my professor reminded me that “No civilized society functions with a media void of regulation.” A few years after the Founding Fathers secured the First Amendment rights in the American Bill of Rights they passed the Sedition Act of 1789, which placed significant restrictions on the practices of free speech and free press. Even in the United States, leaders seemed to hesitate to trust the populous with such a right.

In Rwanda, redefining the media after the vituperative effect it had on the genocide is a large challenge. The added media restraints, nevertheless, make it seemingly impossible for journalists to hold the government, and the populace, accountable for its past.

A reporter associated with *The New Times* admitted to me “There are some things we say, and some things we don’t.” I wondered what he meant by this and who decided the distinction.

Privately owned with “strong government support,” *The New Times* is frequently criticized for its close-knit relationship with Kagame. When I once made a comment about the poor photo quality in the newspaper, I learned that the newspaper doesn’t actually own a printing press. Rather, it uses a government service, nestled in the bottom of the parliament building.

Government funding of the news does not necessarily indicate a pro-government bias. Other governments around the world directly fund national news outlets: England has the BBC, Canada has the CBC, America has PBS and NPR. In fact, many people feel these are the most objective news sources in their countries.³⁸ What makes the Rwandan media situation different is that the government does not just help to fund *The New Times*; it seems to control it.


I watch the *New York Times* photographer, a Canadian man about my age, stray from the rest of the press. He experiments with light, shadow, depth of field. So long as the security guards surrounding the presidents don’t push him aside for getting too close, he has free reign to tell the story he sees fit.

While my situation as intern for *The New Times* allows me to capture whatever images I want as well, my experiences

photographing President Kagame before have taught me that regardless of what photos I take the government will get the final say on what goes to print. At the country’s 50th Independence Day celebration, I was required to send my photographs of Kagame to his office directly afterwards for approval. Kitty Llewellyn, a U.S. citizen and former editor for *The New Times* Sunday section, confirmed in a 2008 correspondence with the U.S. Embassy “...[t]hat the Office of the President sends and approves images of President Kagame used on the front page of the paper.”³⁹

I flinch at the thought of government control. In the United States, I’ve grown accustomed to a media that controls the government. Many even argued that the recent 2012 presidential race was influenced by liberal-leaning political press coverage.⁴⁰ Regardless of partisanship, I would never think to show the president of my American university an article about him before it was published in the campus newspaper. I would never trust an article in *The New York Times* that needed to be approved first by President Obama. I would worry for the sake of censorship. In Rwanda, despite the fact that Article 34 of the Constitution, revised several times since 1995, secures “freedom of press and freedom of information,” many subsequent clauses loosely define circumstances in which the government can control the media.⁴¹ One clause in particular, from my standpoint, seems to be in image-making.

The image of Kagame is highly crafted. His face hangs in every storefront and public space throughout Rwanda. I zoom in to watch his casual interactions with the Clintons. His arms are loosely crossed. At the Independence Day celebration Kagame seemed a bit sterner. He stood before the stadium, fists tightly clenched by his sides. His message, consistent with his portrait throughout Rwanda, is of



power. Internationally, however, Kagame has very little. The picture the foreign press paints of him, positive or negative, is out of his control. Many people are proud of the self-reliance embedded in his innovative models for foreign aid, and credit him for the progress he has brought within Rwanda. Others, including *New York Times* columnist Marc Sommers, feel that “he does not merit his reputation as a visionary modernizer” because his regime is “all about force.” In essence, what Sommers touches on is the virtue of free speech.⁴²

I have continually subscribed to the idea that free speech is an indication of a stable society; after all, the motto of the liberal arts university I attend near Boston is “Truth, even unto its innermost parts.” Nonetheless, in a November 2011 interview with International Reporting Project journalists Kagame challenged this very notion. “If you have politics that concentrate on making people understand that they are different and they should be at each other because of their differences instead of getting together in spite of their differences,” the president said, “that’s exactly where the problem starts.”⁴³

The government sends strong messages that the people must make amends and find ways to reunify. It does not matter who is Hutu or who is Tutsi, though a few years back it meant life or death. Peace is more important to the government. What is inconsistent in this argument, however, is that peace connotes the acceptance – if not respect – of individuals in a society, even if they are different. In 1644, American theologian Roger Williams argued in favor of religious liberty, and the importance of peace over truth. He wrote, “I acknowledge that to molest any person, Jew or Gentile, for either professing doctrine, or practicing worship merely religious or spiritual, it is to persecute

him, and such a person (whatever his doctrine or practice be, true or false) suffereth persecution for conscience.”⁴⁴ If Kagame’s ultimate goal is peace, why does he silence the dissent of others? The message he sends instead is that there’s only one truth, and he decides it.

I center Kagame in my viewfinder. His dark mustache buries the movement of his upper lip as he wraps up his conversation with Bill Clinton. His soft-spoken nature stands in contrast to his militant policies. His reserve, however, is quite similar to that of the people he governs. Throughout Rwanda, tall gates block the homes of residents. Mistrust permeates the country, as it did from the rift between neighbors in the genocide. Eighteen years following, I question if the rift is the reason Kagame is so unwavering in his politics. Is his tough backbone a response to the fear of his people? To understand the underlying fear of free speech is to begin to assess what a society needs to implement it. How can people in Rwanda speak openly when the past has understandably led to a closed and protective society? The answer does not seem simple. It might take more than a free press to solve.

Caught in the Image: Rwanda Moving Forward

November 28th, 2012. “In Rwanda, we wait for violence.” He strokes the ends of his wispy mustache and glances around the empty student lounge. It is the intimate thought of a Rwandan abroad, momentarily freed and quietly desperate to escape the persecution of his homeland’s government. At an American university near Boston, Massachusetts, I feel safe. My eight-week summer experience in the East African country feels distant and compact. Yet free speech for him is still high risk and he hints at the notion that trouble is brewing.

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Today the NPR show “On Point,” hosted by Tom Ashbrook, was dedicated to discussing the recent developments of fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). “In the last week, rebel soldiers have been on the move again. It can all seem murky and far away. But little neighboring Rwanda – a darling of many Americans – is playing a big, controversial role,” Ashbrook says.⁴⁵ He refers to reports that link the current Rwandan government to rebel groups causing violence in the DRC. A political reporter who’d worked in the Great Lakes region of Africa for several years adds, “It looks like the glow around Kagame is starting to fade.”

With growing internal and external media criticism of Rwanda’s current president (and government at large), the question is what will happen to the country’s political climate within the next few years? After all, the country’s elections are approaching in 2015. More importantly, at least from my perspective, is what will happen to the media (specifically *The New Times*)



The Rwandan student beside me clasps his hands and admits to the vulnerability of his country post-genocide. “We needed some sort of censorship, or regulation of speech, to let the people heal.” His tone, feeble and raw, reminds me of how I felt in the aftermath of my own time of loss.

intertwined with the leadership of Rwanda today? If there came to be a shift in power, would the newspaper be able to uphold its mission of objectivity, when it struggles to do so even now? I wonder if it could fall prey to the same extremism that swept the media back in 1994.

Almost five months ago I stood in the sweltering sun documenting the 50th anniversary of Rwanda’s independence. Yet, it seems a new push for independence might be needed. The Rwandan student beside me clasps his hands and admits to the vulnerability of his country post-genocide. “We needed some sort of censorship, or regulation of speech, to let the people heal.” His tone, feeble and raw, reminds me of how I felt in the aftermath of my own time of loss. Two years since my dad died, I question why I immersed myself in the abuses of friendships that did not work. Looking back, however, I try to be sympathetic to the true extremities of my own pain. The idea of support was overwhelmingly attractive.


I wonder if the Rwandan people feel the same looking at Kagame. The stringent regime of the current president could arguably be seen as a scaffold. For the past 18 years, it has offered a protection and forceful embrace to Rwanda, similar to what I too needed in order to recover from the instability of loss. With the passage of time, and the abuses of unhealthy relationships too strong to bear, I realize I am stronger without them. Maybe Rwanda, as seen in the growing number of people – the students and the journalists – willing to speak out against the government, is coming to that same conclusion.

Notes

1. Thompson, A. and K. Annan (2007). *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, Pluto Press. Pp. 82-87
2. Waller, D. (1993). *Rwanda: Which way now?*. Oxford: Oxfam.
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