**Rwanda**

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* 0=most free, 100=least free

**Key Developments: June 2015 – May 2016**

- The *Ireme* news website was blocked in December 2015, joining a number of other independent online media outlets (see Blocking and Filtering).

- Authorities told online news editors to withhold or delete content on sensitive topics, such as the December 2015 constitutional referendum to extend presidential term limits (see Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation).

- In January 2016, an *Ireme* editor and investigative reporter was arrested for sexual assault against a minor, a charge observers believe was fabricated to silence his critical reporting (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities).
Introduction

While access improved in Rwanda, internet freedom declined due to increasing online censorship and self-censorship around the topic of presidential term limits in 2015 and 2016.

Rwanda continued to project itself as an emerging technology hub in the past year, investing heavily in the country’s information and communications technology (ICT) sector to establish itself as a vibrant knowledge economy. The government hosted the second Transform Africa Summit in October 2015 and the World Economic Forum on Africa in May 2016, which both focused on leveraging opportunities for digital transformations and economic growth, and helped entrench Rwanda’s position as a regional leader. Nonetheless, only 18 percent of Rwandans have access to the internet, and poverty continues to be the primary impediment to increasing access.

In sharp contrast to Rwanda’s remarkable progress on economic development, tight restrictions on freedom of speech and political activity are among the world’s worst, imposed under the pretext of political and ethnic tension resulting from the 1994 genocide. Independent civil society and journalism have been crippled by years of repression. Pro-government views dominate domestic media, while the authorities work quickly to censor critical viewpoints, resulting in an information environment that projects a single narrative of unity, peace, and progress. Numerous unlawful detentions in secret detention centers, torture, and even extralegal killings of citizens for their critical viewpoints go unreported, along with efforts to uphold the rule of law.¹

While the environment is still freer online than offline for journalists and citizens alike, the government’s efforts to limit internet freedom have increased in the last few years. Numerous independent online news outlets have been blocked, including the British Broadcasting Corporation’s (BBC)’s local language websites, and pressure on editors to delete critical content or toe the government line is high. The independent news outlet Ireme was newly blocked in December 2015, and an editor and reporter for the site was arrested in January 2016, likely for his critical reporting.

A December 2015 constitutional referendum sought to revise presidential term limits, potentially extending President Paul Kagame’s rule for up to 17 more years. The issue became a new redline for censors, who issued more directives to online news outlets to remove or hold back content. As a result, journalists self-censored when reporting on the vote, which officials said was 98 percent in favor of the change.²

Obstacles to Access

*Rwanda continued making significant investments in its ICT sector to expand internet access and improve affordability. Innovative e-government initiatives were launched to enhance the government’s service delivery to citizens via the internet and mobile devices.*

Availability and Ease of Access

Access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) has increased notably in Rwanda over the past few years, bolstered by investments by the Rwandan government to transform the country into an information economy. According to June 2016 statistics by the Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Agency (RURA), the sector regulator, internet penetration reached 33 percent, growing from 28 percent the previous year. Estimates from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) were lower at 18 percent, up from 11 percent a year prior. Mobile telephone penetration is significantly higher, reaching 70 percent in 2015 according to ITU data, while the government reported 79 percent as of June 2016. Notably, rural communities which comprise 90 percent of the population have a relatively high rate of mobile phone usage, made possible by a well-developed mobile network that covers nearly 100 percent of the country.

Government investments in broadband technology across the country continued to grow, as well as access to electricity via hydropower and solar energy projects, which have helped improve speeds and decrease costs. According to Akamai's *State of the Internet* report, Rwanda's average internet connection speed was 8.7 Mbps in 2016, increasing from 5.6 Mbps the previous year and above the global average of 6.3 Mbps. Access has also become more affordable. The Alliance for Affordable Internet ranked Rwanda as the 11th most affordable internet environment among 51 developing countries in 2015. A 4G LTE network launched by the government in partnership with the Korean Embassy in December 2014, offers the fastest high-speed data for mobile phones and internet-enabled devices. In a new initiative, some public buses in the capital, Kigali, are now wired with 4G internet connections, providing passengers with full access to free fast internet.

Innovative initiatives encouraging both urban and rural populations to use ICTs have expanded in recent years. The e-Soko ("e-market") program provides farmers with real-time information about market prices for their agricultural produce on their mobile devices. Others include a Rwanda National Police mobile registration system for scheduling driver's license exams and renewals; online tax filing with the Rwanda Revenue Authority; an online system for registering commercial companies; and an online system for national exam results published by the Rwanda Education Board. The government also launched Irembo, a platform to improve delivery of government services to citizens and businesses, in October 2015.

Nonetheless, poverty continues to be the primary impediment to ICT uptake, especially the internet, with the majority of the population engaged in subsistence agriculture. Internet access is concentrated primarily in Kigali and remains beyond the reach of many citizens, particularly those in rural areas.

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8 "Registration for driving license tests start," Rwanda National Police, press release, January 18, 2014, [http://www.police.gov.rw/news-detail/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=863&cHash=8412a9646f4dd409486ed87c75141e6a](http://www.police.gov.rw/news-detail/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=863&cHash=8412a9646f4dd409486ed87c75141e6a)
9 See, [http://onlineservices.rra.gov.rw](http://onlineservices.rra.gov.rw)
11 See, Rwanda Education Board, [http://196.44.242.28](http://196.44.242.28)
who are limited by low income and low levels of ICT awareness. Only 11 percent of Rwandans are ICT literate, and over 70 percent of the population speaks only Kinyarwanda, making internet content in English inaccessible to the majority of Rwandans. Only 17 percent of Rwandan households have regular access to electricity.

Restrictions on Connectivity

There were no restrictions on connectivity reported in Rwanda during the coverage period, though Article 52 of the 2001 Law Governing Telecommunications gives the government powers over telecommunications networks in the name of preserving “national integrity.” These powers include the ability to “suspend a telecommunications service for an indeterminate period, either generally or for certain communications.” Furthermore, the government has some control over the country’s internet infrastructure. The ITU has characterized the level of competition for Rwanda’s international gateway as “partial.”

The local internet exchange point (IXP), the Rwanda Internet Exchange (RINEX), is managed by the Rwanda Information & Communications Technology Association, a non-profit comprised of ICT institutions and professionals. As of mid-2016, five of Rwanda’s nine ISPs exchange internet traffic through RINEX, and ISPs can also opt to connect via RINEX to the international internet.

ICT Market

Rwanda’s ICT market continues to be vibrant and competitive, with no reported interference from the government during the period of study. Following market liberalization policies implemented in 2001, there are nine internet service providers (ISPs) and three mobile phone companies, all privately owned. The three main mobile phone operators are MTN, TIGO, and Airtel, with market shares of 49 percent, 35 percent, and 16 percent, respectively.

23 These include fixed-line providers (Liquid Telecom and MTN Rwanda), mobile phone providers (MTN Rwandacell, TIGO and AIRTEL), and internet service providers (MTN Rwanda, Liquid Telecom, TIGO Rwanda, New Artel, ISPA, 4G Networks, BSC, Airtel Rwanda, and AXOIM). See: RURA, “Statistics and Tariff Information in Telecom Sector as of March 2014.”
Regulatory Bodies

The Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Agency (RURA) oversees the regulatory framework and implementation of policy and strategy in the telecommunications sector.²⁵ Officially, RURA has administrative and financial autonomy. Nevertheless, the government audits RURA’s budget while the president nominates its seven board members, supervisory board, and director general, who all work under government oversight, which limits that autonomy in practice.²⁶

In 2015, RURA demonstrated its allegiance to the government in its decision to indefinitely ban BBC radio services and block BBC websites following the October 2014 broadcast of a controversial documentary (see Blocking and Filtering).²⁷ In doing so, it overruled vocal objections voiced by Fred Muvunyi, then-head of the media self-regulatory body, the Rwanda Media Commission (RMC). Muvunyi subsequently fled the country in May 2015 after months of threats and intimidation.²⁸ Journalists interviewed for this report said that the RMC now exists only on paper, acting under instruction from government authorities or security officials.

Limits on Content

Censorship of online content remained high, with a number of independent online media outlets still blocked in the country. Editors of online news sites regularly received official demands to delete critical content or avoid writing critically about certain topics, such as the constitutional referendum to extend presidential term limits in December 2015.

Blocking and Filtering

The Rwandan government endeavors to restrict the types of content that users can access, particularly content that strays from the government’s official line. In 2016, numerous independent news outlets and opposition blogs that have been blocked for years remained inaccessible, including the websites of Inyenyeri News, Veritas Info, The Rwandan, and Leprophete, among others.²⁹ The news website Ireme was added to the block list in December 2015, likely for its critical reporting on the referendum on presidential term limits.³⁰ There is no transparency behind the government’s blocking decisions and no avenue for appeal.

Several BBC websites were blocked in Rwanda following the government’s outcry against the television broadcast of the documentary, “Rwanda, The Untold Story,” in October 2014, which said that the number of Hutus who died during the genocide was much higher than officially recognized. Though

²⁸ Sue Valentine, “Hopes of independent press in Rwanda fade as head of media body flees,” Committee to Protect Journalists (blog), July 8, 2015, https://cpj.org/x/64d5.
²⁹ Study conducted by Freedom House consultant, March 2016. Other opposition blog websites that were unavailable as of May 2016 were: http://www.iwacu1.com; http://ww.musabiyimana.be; http://rwandanewsbanyarwanda.over-blog.com; http://ww.banyarwandapoliticalparty.org.
the documentary had not been aired in Rwanda, the government suspended the BBC’s popular radio services, accusing the outlet of “genocide denial,” a crime under the country’s harsh media laws.\(^{31}\) The regulator RURA indefinitely banned BBC broadcasts in May 2015.\(^{32}\) BBC websites, including BBC Swahili, BBC Africa, BBC Afrique were also blocked, according to a May 2015 report by the Rwanda Media Commission.\(^{33}\) The website of the local language service, BBC Gahuzamiryango, was also inaccessible in 2016.\(^{34}\)

Social-networking sites such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and international blog-hosting services are freely available.

**Content Removal**

The extent to which the government forces websites to delete certain content is unknown, though anecdotal incidents over the past few years suggest it happens frequently. Similar to the restrictive traditional media environment, editors of online news sites often receive calls from the authorities with demands to delete certain content, mostly related to government leaders.\(^{35}\) Such ad hoc requirements lack a legal basis or transparency.\(^{36}\)

According to a 2010 law relating to electronic messages, signatures, and transactions, intermediaries and service providers are not held liable for content transmitted through their networks.\(^{37}\) Nonetheless, service providers are required to taken down content when handed a takedown notice, and there are no avenues for appeal.

**Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation**

Government repression of the media greatly limits the diversity of the information landscape both online and offline. Critical and independent online news produced by opposition supporters overseas—mainly in Europe, the United States, and South Africa—are blocked in Rwanda. Few Rwandans are aware of this practice, though savvy journalists seeking independent sources of information report using proxy servers to access critical information.\(^{38}\)

While Rwandans are active on Facebook and Twitter, which have become popular with the rise of internet-enabled mobile phone use, self-censorship has become more pervasive among both online journalists and ordinary users due to increasing government repression, social pressure to toe the government line, and fear of reprisals. Pro-government trolls also harass online users for their critical

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\(^{35}\) Interview with journalist writers of igihe.com and Kigali Today who requested to stay anonymous.

\(^{36}\) Two online news websites, Umusingi and Umurabyo, had reported experiencing such requests to delete content related to local political affairs and ethnic relations in previous years.


\(^{38}\) Author interviews with anonymous journalists, May 2016.
commentary and manipulate online conversations. Internet users typically avoid topics that can be construed as critical of the government or disruptive to national unity and reconciliation.

When online journalists try to push the boundaries, their editors frequently contend with editorial interference by security officials and other government authorities who impose redlines limiting what can be published. Journalists say editorial decisions are heavily influenced by government forces—including police officers, army officers, and powerful leaders—whose demands are colloquially known as, “I say this.” Journalists self-censored in their coverage of the December 2015 constitutional referendum on presidential term limits, deliberately suppressing stories in the public interest. One journalist reported witnessing the forced collection of signatures for a petition in support of the constitutional change.

Given the even more restricted space for press freedom in the traditional media sphere, Rwandan media outlets are increasingly going online to bypass government control or suspension as well as heavy production costs. However, independent outlets face economic challenges in comparison to their state-run counterparts, which receive income from government advertisements and direct subsidies. Large businesses only advertise with state-owned or pro-government media outlets based on an unspoken rule.

Digital Activism

Digital activism over political and social issues is not common in Rwanda. Radio and television call-in programs were once a positive outlet for citizens with mobile phones to anonymously voice critical political or social viewpoints. However, given SIM card registration requirements, users have become reluctant to participate in critical or sensitive discussions out of fear of being identified. In the past year, callers were less critical and more likely to praise the status quo.

Violations of User Rights

An investigative reporter and editor with the Ireme news website was arrested in January 2016, a month after the site was blocked. He faces charges of sexual assault against a minor, which observers say were trumped up to silence his critical reporting.

39 In 2014, an international journalist for Radio France Internationale, Sonia Rolley, was repeatedly harassed on Twitter by a user known as @RichardGoldston. Rolley had been reporting on the mysterious January 1, 2014 assassination of Patrick Karegeya, a former top intelligence official in Kagame’s inner circle who had been living in exile in Johannesburg. It was later revealed on the official Twitter account of Paul Kagame’s office (@UrugwiroVillage) that “@RichardGoldston was an unauthorized account run by an employee in the Presidency.”


41 “I know very well that people would really want to read an article about some malpractices that happened in a certain District in Southern Province, where agents voted for people who were not around and influenced voters just for a certain candidate to win as was already decided. However, I know that this can endanger my outlet,” said one online journalist interviewed on February 24, 2016, who requested anonymity.


Legal Environment

The Rwandan constitution, adopted in May 2003, provides for freedom of the press and information along with other legislative instruments, including Law N° 02/2013 regulating media, and Law No 04/2013 of relating to access to information. In practice, the government maintains tight control over the media and information landscape. Amendments to the 2009 Media Law, passed in 2013, provided the government with some scope to control the internet by giving the minister of ICTs unlimited powers to establish the conditions for local and foreign media companies to operate in Rwanda. The Rwandan judiciary is not independent, and many journalists view the threat of imprisonment as a key constraint on their work.

While there are no laws that specifically restrict internet content or criminalize online expression, Rwanda’s generally restrictive legal provisions governing the traditional media can be applied to the internet. Penalties for criminal defamation may also be applicable to online speech. Defamation of the president or other public officials carries a penalty of up to five years in prison. October 2013 amendments to the law against “genocide ideology” similarly threatens freedom of expression both online and off, prescribing heavy prison sentences of up to 9 years and fines for any offender “...who disseminates genocide ideology in public through documents, speeches, pictures, media or any other means.” The law also lacks a clear distinction between private and public speech.

Journalists say the government has the ability to restrict the internet and infringe on user privacy under the pretext of protecting national security. One online journalist who requested anonymity said, “There is a difference between how laws are written and how they are put into practice. Ask me about what I face while exercising my profession and leave alone the laws. We have very well written and ‘thought-about’ laws, but their implementation has its own unwritten laws.”

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Citizens are periodically arrested for online activities in Rwanda, though the lack of critical commentary originating in the country and the high degree of self-censorship practiced by online journalists and ordinary users alike has resulted in fewer incidents. Cases may also be underreported given the government’s strict controls of the media. One arrest was reported in the past year.

In January 2016, John William Ntwali, an investigative reporter and editor of the Ireme news website (which was blocked a month prior in December) was arrested and held for 13 days. He was charged with sexual assault against a minor in a case that could not be substantiated, leading observers to believe the charge was trumped-up in an effort to silence him for his critical reporting.

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46 Law N° 02/2013 of 08/02/2013 regulating media in Rwanda.
47 Law No 04/2013 of 08/02/2013 relating to access to information.
Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

The sophistication of the Rwandan authorities’ surveillance capabilities is unknown, but there is a strong sense that surveillance is pervasive. Exiled Rwandan dissidents have been attacked and murdered, despite their efforts to protect their identities, following threats from individuals inside or associated with the government.54

October 2013 amendments to the 2008 Law Relating to the Interception of Communications expanded the government’s surveillance powers, authorizing high-ranking security officials to tap the communications of individuals considered potential threats to “public security,” including online.55 Under the amendments, communications service providers are required to ensure that their systems have the technical capability to intercept communications upon demand, though security officials also have the power to “intercept communications using equipment that is not facilitated by communication service providers,” which de facto allows the authorities to hack into a telecommunications network without a provider’s knowledge or assistance.56 While the law requires government officials to apply for an interception warrant, warrants are issued by the national prosecutor, who is appointed by the justice minister. The national prosecutor can also issue warrants verbally in urgent security investigations, to be followed by a written warrant within 24 hours. There is no requirement to justify surveillance as necessary and proportionate to a legitimate aim.57

In July 2015, email leaks from the Italian surveillance firm Hacking Team revealed that the Rwandan government attempted to purchase sophisticated spyware known as Remote Control System (RCS) in 2012.58 While the leaked emails did not confirm that a sale took place, they illustrate the government interest in acquiring technology that can monitor and intercept user communications.

The ability to communicate anonymously is compromised by mandatory SIM card registration requirements in place since 2013.59 Under the regulation establishing SIM card registration, the ICT regulator RURA has unfettered access to SIM card databases managed by operators, while other “authorized” individuals or institutions may also be granted access.60

The various legal provisions that enable surveillance and limit anonymity are particularly troubling in the absence of a comprehensive data protection law to safeguard citizens’ private data. A data protection law was drafted in July 2013, though the draft provided exceptions in the vaguely defined interest of national sovereignty, national security, and public policy, which could be abused to monitor individuals critical of the regime.61 There was no movement on the passage of the law as of mid-2016.

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www.freedomonthenet.org
Intimidation and Violence

Critical journalists frequently face violence and harassment when attempting to cover news stories, leading many to flee the country.62 According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Rwanda ranks among the top countries from which journalists seek exile.63 There were no reported incidents of violence against online journalists and ordinary users during the coverage period, though high levels of censorship and self-censorship may result in underreporting.

Technical Attacks

There was no evidence of technical attacks against online news outlets or users in Rwanda during the period under study. The last reported attack occurred in April 2014, when the investigative news website, Ireme, experienced a seemingly targeted cyberattack from an unknown source.64 Ireme was blocked in December 2015 (see Blocking and Filtering).

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64 Reporters Without Borders, “Wave of intimidation of Kigali media.”