

When Journalists See Themselves as Villains: The Power of Negative Discourse

Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly
2021, Vol. 98(3) 790–807
© 2021 AEJMC
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1077699020985465
<http://journals.sagepub.com/home/jmq>



Ruth Moon^{1,2} 

Abstract

This article examines the way journalists talk about themselves and negotiate authority with sources, audiences, and media policy in a postconflict, developmental authoritarian state. Grounded in concepts of metajournalistic discourse and authority, the study shows how members of the journalism field in some contexts embrace a narrative that limits autonomy and situates them as untrustworthy social actors. Interviews collected over a 7-month period in Rwanda show that a shared sense of untrustworthiness defines the contemporary boundaries of the Rwandan journalism field. The findings also suggest that consensus-oriented or postconflict social contexts might encourage journalists to adopt less autonomous social roles.

Keywords

international journalism, postconflict journalism, metajournalistic discourse, Rwanda

The stories that journalists tell about themselves have the potential to shape their field in powerful ways. Metajournalistic discourse—journalistic narrative about the profession—underpins the construction of journalistic roles, defines the boundaries of appropriate behavior, and sets the tone for relationships with sources, audiences, and others (Carlson, 2016; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). However, much of the literature about metajournalistic discourse and its impact on the field of journalism currently comes from research situated in the context of Western democracies, where journalism is a fairly strong institution with an established role as a purveyor of information, a source of elite discourse, and often a watchdog in pursuit of government transparency (Cook,

¹University of Washington, Seattle, USA

²Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, USA

Corresponding Author:

Ruth Moon, Manship School of Mass Communication, Louisiana State University, 211 Journalism Building, Baton Rouge, LA 70803-2804, USA.

Email: rmoonmari@lsu.edu

1998; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In these contexts, and indeed in many contexts around the world, journalists tend to value autonomy and promote their own social status in their metadiscourse (Waisbord, 2013).

This article extends the discussion of metajournalistic narrative to the context of a postconflict, developmental authoritarian¹ African state. This setting has parallels with the situations of many journalists around the world: Authoritarianism is on the rise and more than two dozen countries have experienced recent, significant internal conflict. More countries are fully or partially authoritarian than are fully or partially democratic, and more than one third of the world's population lives in a country that is authoritarian, postconflict, or both (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020; C. C. Fiedler & Mroß, 2017; Puddington, 2017). Observations from the Rwandan journalism field have the potential to expand scholarly understanding of journalism in many of these places.

In this article, I examine the ways Rwandan journalists talk about themselves. I focus specifically on metajournalistic discourse related to journalistic autonomy and social position with the following research question:

RQ1: What is the metajournalistic narrative about autonomy among Rwandan journalists?

I find that journalists in Rwanda adopt a narrative of limited autonomy and social untrustworthiness. Although a number of factors influence this narrative, journalists tie it most strongly to the field's role in the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi. The ways journalists talk about their relationships with sources, audiences, and legal constraints highlight the centrality of this story. By illuminating this discourse, I contribute to scholarly understanding of the variety in journalism communities around the world. In addition, this study highlights the fact that the reality of journalism on the ground in many countries may look markedly different from that proposed by theories originating in, and tested in, Western contexts, pointing to the continued importance of grounding research in local communities and contexts to better understand journalism today.

Metajournalistic Discourse and Journalism Work

Journalists negotiate their social role in the context of other powerful social fields, including the political arena (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The journalistic field gains or loses authority and legitimacy, in part, from relational negotiations with actors in other fields, including members of the political field, sources, and audience members. The political field sets the context within which journalists operate, but members of the journalism field can also negotiate power—in some South and Central American countries, for instance, journalists have successfully lobbied for stronger freedom of information laws and ended overt government censorship (Hughes, 2003; Michener, 2011). Journalists rely on sources and audience members to provide vital resources for their work, and they also gain and confer legitimacy through their interactions with these groups (Carlson, 2017).

Self-perception, especially of social role and relative power, shapes the journalist's interactions with other actors. As Carlson and Usher (2016) point out, metajournalistic discourse provides a window into journalists' concerns, their professional identities, and their sense-making strategies. Barbie Zelizer (1993) posits that journalists' shared stories about themselves lend collective identity and purpose to their community. In their narratives, journalists set rules and boundaries for their field by defining and excluding deviant or unacceptable behavior and rewarding exemplary behavior as legitimate (Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Ofori-Parku & Botwe, 2020). Journalists tend to uphold shared values in metajournalistic discourse, using these values to defend fringe behavior such as peace-oriented journalism and digital news startups (Aitamurto & Varma, 2018; Carlson and Usher, 2016). When narratives focus on prominent historical narratives of journalistic misbehavior—as in the told and retold stories of Jayson Blair and other U.S. journalists accused of fabrication, plagiarism, or poor reporting—the stories tend to focus on the individuals' inappropriate behavior rather than collective responsibility. The stories protect the general appropriateness and value of journalism by highlighting strict organizational and professional responses to deviance and upholding the field's role as a “powerful institution shaping public knowledge” (Carlson, 2014, p. 45).

A central role of metajournalistic discourse is to uphold the central importance of autonomy, which encompasses freedom from interference and regulation and the ability to criticize powerful actors (Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013). Journalists in many different positions hold autonomy as a core value, even when they disagree over its definition (Singer, 2007). They protect this value and advocate for the journalistic profession in their discourse by drawing boundaries, upholding good journalism, and policing misbehavior by field members (Carlson, 2017; Eldridge, 2014). Although the reality of journalistic autonomy varies widely across political and economic contexts, studies consistently find that journalists defend their right to it, even in countries with authoritarian governance, and that it is central to their identities (Waisbord, 2013).

Alternatives to Autonomy

In sum, studies of metajournalistic discourse primarily reveal narratives promoting in-group favoritism. The stories journalists tell about themselves explain social realities by elevating “real” journalism to the detriment of nonjournalists or pseudo-journalists, using in-group characteristics to promote the autonomy and authority of the journalism field. However, a number of disciplines provide evidence to suggest that journalists might not always value autonomy so highly. Two factors that may influence this stance are a postconflict context and a consensus-based social environment, both of which are relevant in Rwanda.

In postconflict situations, groups and individuals are particularly receptive to narratives that support peace and unity over conflict and tension. Residents recovering from trauma and violence tend to embrace authoritarian leadership styles and values of structure, control, and collective well-being over democratic values of tolerance and individual liberties (Dyrstad, 2013). Adding to this general inclination, authoritarian

governing parties formed from victorious insurgent military groups in countries such as Rwanda, Uganda, and Ethiopia exhibit strong leadership traits including cohesive leadership, discipline, and clear hierarchies that both strengthen the government and discourage dissent (Lyons, 2016). Furthermore, strong authoritarian parties engender high levels of solidarity when they originate in mass conflict (Levitsky & Way, 2002). Thus, it might be the case that, although most journalists generally seek autonomy as a central value to their field and occupation, journalists in particular contexts—especially postconflict and authoritarian political systems—might choose to embrace a different stance in the interest of maintaining the status quo.

In addition, the nature of journalism and community on the African continent, to the extent that it can be generalized, exhibits some characteristics that are different from those of journalistic communities in Western Europe and the United States, and that could reduce the value of autonomy in particular contexts. African governance depends on “coexistence and interdependence between the individual and the community, between communities, and between the state and the various cultural communities” rather than on the Western liberal democratic concept of individualism (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p. 35). In many African governance systems and cultures, consensus occupies a privileged place. This is particularly true in Rwanda, as I will explore in the next section. For several reasons, then, journalists might make varying and context-dependent claims to autonomy in their metadiscourse.

The Context of Rwandan Journalism

Across sub-Saharan Africa, local media industries developed under colonial and post-colonial Western influences. In many cases, media systems still reflect these influences today (Ndlela, 2009). In the East African region, print media appeared in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with settler presses established as extensions of European news outlets, carrying the European journalism norms out to the colonies (Musandu, 2018; Scotton, 1973). Local-language newspapers began to appear soon after, and starting in the 1920s, news outlets in Uganda and elsewhere began to publish social and political commentary pushing for independence (Scotton, 1973). Journalism fields in the region began to occupy a social space of political engagement and alignment with particular policies and parties in support of a national interest (Carter, 1968). In many African states, journalism fields evolved within a context of historical tension between democratic liberation movements and Marxist and Africanist one-party statism (Rønning & Kupe, 2000). Rwanda is one example: Through the 1970s, it had a legally enforced one-party political system that shaped press freedom and roles (Jose, 1975).

Although many countries, including Rwanda, now offer journalism training at local universities, the programs are often rooted in Western practices and understanding of journalism, leaving journalists to learn the realities of local practice on the job (Ndlela, 2009). In Rwanda, Canadian and Western European faculty staffed the local journalism program through the early 2000s (Skjerdal & Ngugi, 2007). The result of these diverse influences is that journalists must negotiate between local political, religious,

or social expectations and the globally shared expectations and definitions of journalism. Media actors in the continent are expected to continually negotiate liberal democratic values with inherently contradictory but equally democratic “African notions of personhood and agency” (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p. 20). This tension leads to constant struggle for journalists, who must make sense of expectations that they will, among other things, promote democracy, save face with foreign dignitaries, and support pro-African interests—expectations that often conflict. Nyamnjoh (2005) shows how journalists under these pressures in Cameroon have become partisan, politicized, and militant, three attitudes that hinder, rather than help, the cause of democracy.

The current Rwandan political environment developed in the wake of the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi (hereafter “genocide”), in which an estimated 800,000 people, primarily of Tutsi identity, were killed over a 100-day span (Prunier, 1997). The genocide came to an end when now-president Paul Kagame, leading the Rwandan Patriotic Front military force, defeated the government forces orchestrating the genocide. Journalists and the news media were involved in spreading messages of dissent and ethnic division before and during the genocide, though there is some debate about the extent of media influence over specific acts of violence (Kellow & Steeves, 1998; Straus, 2007; Thompson, 2007). The tension between Hutu and Tutsi identities dates back to class divisions instituted in the region well before colonization, but Belgian officials clarified, strengthened, and racialized the division (Cooper, 2002; Mamdani, 2001; Straus, 2013). In the reconstruction project following the genocide, government leaders explicitly and thoroughly instituted a framework of unity that included removing references to Tutsi and Hutu identity and making it illegal to discuss or use the labels (Purdeková, 2015; Straus, 2015). A law prohibiting “divisionism”—which has been criticized for vaguely defining key terms in ways that limit the scope of journalism—extends scrutiny to any who publicly discusses ethnic tension (The Economist, 2019; Harber, 2014). Partly as a result of this, many journalists avoid the topic altogether (Sobel & McIntyre, 2019). Observers consider the rest of the Rwandan government’s policy toward journalists to be fairly restrictive as well (Moon, 2019). Rwandan journalists report that even laws extending important freedoms for journalistic work, such as an access to information act, are poorly implemented, whereas others, including an antidefamation law, are vaguely worded and tend to be enforced against journalists. In the postconflict context of Rwanda, factors restricting press freedom can be found on multiple levels—in the political system but also in ownership systems, advertising, information sources, and journalists themselves, via self-censorship (A. Fiedler & Frère, 2018).

The present study examines the nature of metajournalistic discourse among Rwandan journalists amid this political and historical context.

Method

The data for this study come from interviews conducted with 40 journalists during a 7-month network ethnographic study of Rwandan newsrooms and East African journalists in 2017.² Network ethnography uses virtual network relationships to guide

selection of physical observation and interview sites, thus combining virtual and physical spaces in a way that accommodates both the presence and impact of virtual networks on information production and the importance of physical spaces in the process (Howard, 2002; Mabweazara & Mare, 2017). Initial interview participants were selected using a Twitter-based social network analysis that also identified primary field sites for participant observation (the observation data are only mentioned briefly in the present study's analysis). Twitter is widely used by journalists and is increasingly popular across sub-Saharan Africa (Hermida, 2013; Hussey, 2016). The social network analysis identified the *New Times*, a print newspaper created shortly after the genocide, as a central node with the highest measure of betweenness centrality in the network. Betweenness centrality indicates the number of connections that pass through a particular node. A high measure signals an organization or actor that serves as a gatekeeper with a high capacity for transforming, editing, or pausing information flow because it connects many actors in the network (Johansson & Nożewski, 2018; Vergeer, 2015). The network analysis identified *KT Press*, a newer web publication, as a bridging node between the community of English-language news outlets and the community of Kinyarwanda-language outlets.³ Interview participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method seeded with editors and reporters at the *New Times* and *KT Press* and included Rwandan employees from a variety of publications. I usually conducted participant observation in a newsroom for a week or two before beginning interviews, to better understand the social context and build rapport with the journalists I interviewed.

The current study focuses primarily on interviews with journalists at the central node of the *New Times* and the bridging node of *KT Press*. This focus highlights the beliefs and behavior of elite journalists, which are likely to influence others around the field of practice (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).⁴ The quotes used in this article come from interview participants listed in Table 1. Interviews for this study were semistructured and ranged from 45 to 90 min, with a questionnaire based on that used in the Worlds of Journalism project (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). The primary language in Rwanda is Kinyarwanda, which is spoken by 93% of the population. Less than 0.1% of the population speaks French or English; however, the elite journalists sampled in this study spoke English fluently, and interviews were conducted in English to reduce translation errors in the interview itself and in transcription (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020; Herod, 1999). I conducted most of the interviews in face-to-face, private interactions, and I recorded and took notes. I conducted some interviews in private areas at workplaces and others at local restaurants, at the participant's preference. Transcripts were coded using the constant comparative method with the goal of producing substantive theories about the application and composition of metajournalistic discourse in the Rwandan context (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). This analytical method involves coding raw data while developing and refining theoretical categories until theoretical saturation is achieved. I began coding data for this concept from early interviews while still conducting fieldwork and interviews, and thus was able to adapt and expand later interview questions to expand my understanding of the concept, as recommended in the constant comparative approach.

Table 1. Interviewee, Job Category, and Employer.

| Participant | Job category | Employer |
|---------------|--------------|--|
| Journalist 1 | Editor | <i>New Times</i> |
| Journalist 2 | Reporter | <i>New Times</i> |
| Journalist 3 | Director | Journalism advocacy organization (name withheld) |
| Journalist 4 | Editor | <i>New Times</i> |
| Journalist 5 | Reporter | <i>New Times</i> |
| Journalist 6 | Reporter | Wire service (name withheld) |
| Journalist 7 | Reporter | <i>KT Press</i> |
| Journalist 8 | Editor | <i>KT Press</i> |
| Journalist 9 | Editor | <i>KT Press</i> |
| Journalist 10 | Editor | <i>KT Press</i> |
| Journalist 11 | Editor | <i>New Times</i> |

Analysis

The Genocide and Metajournalistic Discourse

Journalists in contemporary Rwanda construct their occupational identities and social roles in response to and consideration of the role their occupational predecessors played in the genocide (Cruikshank, 2017; McIntyre & Sobel, 2018; Sobel & McIntyre, 2019). A commonly shared belief among journalists and in society more broadly is that journalists used their occupation to exacerbate the genocide, and because of this, journalists are powerful and cannot be trusted. Journalists are socially constructed as untrustworthy but symbolically powerful figures in the Rwandan public sphere. This social construction is rooted in shared narratives about the genocide and is evident in how journalists talk about their professional relationships with members of various social groups outside the occupation and the normative burdens on their profession.

The perception that journalists have social power is evident in the ways the interview participants recount cultural narratives of the media's involvement in the genocide. Journalist 1 recounted, "Someone went on the radio—a normal journalist—and called on the people to start killing. And the people said, 'OK, I have to do it, because they said it on the radio'." Journalist 5 reiterated the tale: "In the genocide, we had journalists who sensitized people to kill. They were using the radio station to spread the message of hate and killing. And some people died because a journalist told the militia where they were hiding." These journalists emphasize two important things about the story: First, it was "normal journalists" who spread powerful messages of violence that resulted in the deaths of so many people. Second, a large part of the power in the messages came from the medium and the field itself, not the particular journalist's voice. Journalist 6 noticed this as well: "The history of this country is not easy," he said. "There was genocide here and the media played a role to make people fight. The media was used during the genocide . . . We have to be careful when writing about this society, because of what happened." Journalists share a deeply held belief

that they are members of a profession where, if they act irresponsibly, they have power to directly create violence.

Not only did journalists during the genocide use the power of name recognition that had been built up over years of doing their jobs, but they used their work platforms to broadcast and publish those messages. Thus, in this narrative, it is not just the rogue journalist who has diverged from his or her role to take a public stance, but all journalists, even those going about their daily routines as usual, who are implicated in the genocide. Journalists see their fellow practitioners as responsible for stirring up violence, and even for outing specific people on the radio who would later be killed. The narrative recounted by these journalists aligns with that presented by news accounts and research about the genocide. Kellow and Steeves (1998) recount how, in the months leading up the genocide, the radio station RTLM cultivated an audience through its broadcasts of “hot news” (*inkuruishushu*), which often included stories of attacks and alleged misconduct by opposition party members. The radio station relied on “excellent journalists” who were recruited from industry jobs to produce these shows (p. 118). In addition, journalists were often at the top of the lists of people to be killed during the genocide, occasionally for their ethnicity but more often because of their political involvement and occupations.

This shared belief that journalists are powerful influences the foundational beliefs and boundaries of the Rwandan journalism field. Because journalists hold a belief that their field has wielded power to cause chaos in the past, the field today is seen as one that contains the potential to wield such power again. Journalists interpret policies and behavior directed at them and their colleagues in light of their assessment of this symbolic power. They also incorporate this sense of power into their discussions about their own social role and interactions.

The message that journalists believe they are untrustworthy is evident in the way they talk about themselves and the occupation of journalism. As a result of this message, journalists are fairly quick to self-censor and tend to feel that journalists should avoid pursuing overt conflict or “opposition.” Journalist 4 demonstrated this in a passing conversation about the role of CNN in covering the new U.S. president, Donald Trump (this was around the time of Trump’s inauguration, and news about the president was ubiquitous on global television channels in the newsroom). This editor informed me that “the media should print the truth, but not be the opposition.” He was telling me that CNN had recently published a piece embracing the “opposition party” role that Trump had declared the media to hold, and the editor was critical of this stance. He said objectivity was an important goal to meet but that active opposition to the president is political, and thus unacceptable. He felt that the American media and other Western media held too much power and would unfairly define Trump’s legacy. Journalist 4 further explained,

Yes, we are journalists, we have to be free to exercise our right to communicate, to do our job, hold everybody accountable—but also exercise all this responsibly. There has to be that sense of accountability on our part.

This moment demonstrated what I observed in many interactions and conversations. A core belief of many in the Rwandan journalism field is that journalism should have

some social power but should not be entirely autonomous or omnipotent. Instead, it should operate within constraints from other social institutions. This shared belief forms a core guiding principle of the Rwandan journalism field that defines the ways journalists choose to interact with political processes and the ways they search for stories and interact with sources.

This sense that the appropriate social role for the Rwandan journalist should be one of limited autonomy is directly due to the role journalists played in the genocide, and the shared narrative around the genocide today. The genocide “creates a confusion,” Journalist 8 said; because of the strong message about media responsibility in 1994, journalists exist in a state of uncertainty about which messages and stories are safe to pursue and publish, and which might stir up negative emotions and, potentially, genocidal actions among current audiences. Some content, such as updates about the stock market, were safe terrain; however, any stories that might involve overt or implied conflict, especially political, would be treated with care and reluctance. As a result, journalists often self-censor to avoid creating conflict. “Journalists themselves haven’t trusted themselves to hold [policymakers and leaders] accountable. There is that mistrust because of the past,” Journalist 5 said.

Journalists and Their Sources

The sense of untrustworthiness that journalists share about their field means they are inclined to self-censor and acquiesce to external control, accepting a position of limited autonomy rather than pushing for more autonomy and control in their work. Because journalists are unsure whether they should fill a social role of investigation and are conflict averse, they often do not push interviews in a critical or interrogative direction. Instead, they are likely to take a softer approach to reporting that accepts and presents information a source offers.

The untrustworthiness of the journalism field is also embedded in the way reporters and sources interact. Journalists were frequently treated with suspicion; potential sources were skeptical of their goals and reluctant to share information that might be published in a news report. Journalist 5 explained, “Everyone is so conscious about what they present in the paper or radio. Policymakers and leaders want to be sure—what are you going to write?” The message from potential and actual sources is that journalists might misuse information and do not deserve the benefit of the doubt. This lack of faith is evident in the reluctance of most sources to give journalists information. Journalist 5, who had worked briefly at a newspaper in North America, explained that sources reacted much differently in Rwanda than they did in Canada. In Canada, sources from the general public “will tell you exactly what you want. In Rwanda, it’s different,” he said. Sources would react with skepticism, “because they don’t have a good memory, or a good experience with journalists in the past.” This reluctance also was evident from sources with political power. Journalist 7 explained,

You talk to the minister and he says, “Ahh, I know you! Before you have published your story, get me the draft so I look at it.” . . . The society doesn’t trust us. And it’s difficult to get someone who can trust you with classified emails or a hidden agenda . . . They have that fear of the media. They know that we denounced them, so they don’t trust us.

Journalists overwhelmingly reported this mentality of suspicion permeating their interaction with sources of all kinds, from everyday citizens approached for comment to high-power government officials reluctant to comment on their work. This cloud of untrustworthiness shapes the work of Rwandan journalists. Before a particular journalist can produce an article or broadcast, he or she must first gain the trust of each source involved, building from a position of relative lack of trust in the journalism field in general. As Journalist 5 summed up, “The main challenge is the trust, really. Should I trust you? As a journalist, should I trust you as my source of information? Or if I’m a source of information, why should I trust you?” Sources, who provide crucial information for journalism work, often mistrust the journalism field and, by extension, the specific journalists they encounter.

Journalists and Their Audiences

Rwandan journalists’ shared belief in their untrustworthiness and subsequent lack of autonomy are also evident in the way journalists interpret their reception by audiences and the general public. Here again, journalists report that audiences are unlikely to trust news reports due to the journalism field’s role in the 1994 genocide. Journalist 9 explained,

During the genocide, radio and newspapers were really vibrant. People could just tune in and listen for directions on where they were going to attack and which roadblock should be where, what you guys should be doing at the roadblock, and things like that which were really negative. So today, I think there’s a feeling of, do I really trust a newspaper?

This feeling was not confined to newspaper journalists; radio, which played a substantial role in message coordination during the genocide, shared a similar suspect social role. As a result of this lack of support from the audience and the public, editors and reporters felt they had a weak bargaining position if they were to come under government scrutiny.

According to Journalist 10,

It has been said since the genocide that the media are bad people, they provoked the genocide—that has created a perception in people that the media is a dangerous thing and it’s not something you should trust . . . When the government has a complaint about you, they are assured that they will have the public’s support.

According to this editor, based on the role journalists played in the genocide, the public would be unlikely to support the media over the government in a conflict. Instead, the first response is likely to be one of mistrust of media, and an assumption that journalists must have made a mistake somehow. If members of the journalism field could stir up such a large and violent conflict as the genocide, then they would certainly be capable of reporting untruths and stirring up dissent in the present time—in other words, the field of journalism is untrustworthy.

Journalist 6 reiterated the general public distrust of the media in Rwanda, saying that a reporter attempting to investigate government corruption and advocate for citizens would often be met with distrust.

Here . . . people are suspicious. When you go down and you talk to people and say, "Look here, I am doing this because this money is meant for you, not for government," they will not seem to understand . . . The society itself cannot come on the side of journalists and see the good.

Rwandan journalists who face censure from the government are likely to also face judgment from the public, which tends to not grant the journalist the benefit of the doubt. This feeling plays a role particularly in relationships with sources, from politicians to private citizens on the street, who journalists say mistrust the media because of the role journalists played in the genocide. "If they actually want to hide something, for example, it was so easy an excuse to say 'you see guys, you are known to be inflammatory, you are known to be sensational, you see what happened,'" said Journalist 1. "Of course, to a certain degree, the onus was on the journalists to prove themselves, that they are different." He called this "the issue of mind-set," saying "most people know that a journalist is a bad man."

This metajournalistic narrative tells the story of a profession that is untrustworthy and, therefore, undeserving of social and political support. Notably, journalists' reports on audience lack of trust primarily stem back to reports from the genocide, not from current practices (even though, as noted earlier and in other studies on Rwandan journalism, the country's media system is primarily progovernment and news is often presented with a positive spin). In the case of Rwandan journalists, negative stories from journalism history serve not to reinforce the boundaries and standards of today's good journalism, but rather to reinforce the message that the field of journalism as a whole should be treated with suspicion and given limited autonomy. It also releases contemporary journalists from any responsibility they might hold in contributing to perceptions of untrustworthiness; rather, the impression stems back to the genocide almost exclusively, and as long as journalists today do not stir up dissent, then they are doing their part to restore faith. Journalist 2 stated this succinctly: "The media played a big role in the genocide. It has undermined the profession and has caused people to feel that they should not trust the media." As a result, individual journalists—no matter their outlook, abilities, or interest in pursuing conflict in news coverage—must interact with and overcome the attitude in their everyday work. For all journalists across the field, work is colored by the perception that journalists are untrustworthy. This narrative suggests that metajournalistic discourse does not always work to reinforce boundaries and uphold autonomy, but can in fact serve other ends, depending on the stories being told and their context.

Journalists and Media Policy

Journalists' discourse about their policy environment shows that, because of the overarching narrative outlined above, they interpreted fairly limited and restrictive policies

as appropriately limiting their behavior rather than pushing against limits to autonomy. In spite of the challenges journalists related in dealing with media policy, they tended to say the law is fair and appropriate. Thus, journalists interpret the policy environment in a way consistent with the field's metanarrative that journalists are powerful but untrustworthy. In the context of that metanarrative, journalists tend to legitimize Rwanda's media policy as one that is not only fair but also helpful in the boundaries it creates around the Rwandan journalism field. They also tend to absorb criticism of the field as evidence of inappropriate field development, rather than externalizing it as something that is nonrepresentative, policed appropriately, or the result of inappropriate policy or other contextual factors. Journalists are cast as the relatively undeserving recipients of some favorable policies but the field is seen to generally need stronger internal policing to improve the quality of newsgathering routines and news content. Journalists communicated this message in a few ways. Several journalists described political and governmental actions and policies as either supportive or, if unsupportive, unsupportive in a way common to "all governments." Interview participants also explicitly attributed their failure to produce particular kinds of news content—in particular, investigative reporting—to individual and field-wide lack of professionalism.

The message that government officials and the government as a whole deserves some level of fair treatment or coverage is conveyed in the way journalists talk about government control. Several editors and reporters compared the Rwandan situation with the U.S. situation with Donald Trump as president. Journalists also shared a belief that the necessary laws to protect journalistic work had been enacted by the Rwandan government, and that punitive laws served to protect and elevate the image of the journalist in the public eye.

Journalists interpreting the policy environment tended to see restrictive policies as helpful or necessary for the journalism field in its current state and given its history. Another interpretive effect of the policy environment was that journalists believed that, because the laws provided the necessary tools and authority to do their work, any failure to produce quality journalism was the fault of individuals or organizations within the field, not due to external factors. Journalist 3 illustrated this, sharing that many journalists engaged in censorship and that, although this censorship was partly due to economic constraints, individual journalists and organizations would be responsible to eradicate it because removing stories at the request of officials or advertisers fell to "the collaboration of the media outlet to remove it and the person who is telling them to remove it." This was also evident in the *New Times* editorial discussions of investigative reporting. Editors generally expressed frustration that this did not happen more, and Journalist 11 pointed to freedom of information laws that exist in Rwanda and said, "I don't see why we can't do it [investigative reporting]. I think we should be able to do it." Finally, this message was evident in the way journalists talked about their peers being arrested in the course of their work. Journalists are arrested infrequently in contemporary Rwanda, but the field is small and most people know when another journalist is arrested. Journalist 2 explained that, when he heard of a friend being arrested, he generally expected that it was because that person was not properly trained: "They thought that journalism is something you

can wake up and do . . . you should have basic skills before you can start.” Journalist 5 said that “media professionalism here, it’s growing day by day—it’s not where we want to be.” In summary, journalists in Rwanda who recounted journalistic failings tended to attribute those failures to failures of the field itself—lack of training in the field, unskilled journalists, or otherwise the responsibility of individual journalists who were members of the field, rather than externalizing or distancing themselves from the inappropriate behavior.

Conclusion

This study investigates the boundaries of journalism in a postconflict, developmental authoritarian African state by examining metajournalistic discourse about the historical origins of the contemporary journalism field and discourse about journalists’ relationships with sources, audiences, and the law in Rwanda. I find that journalists in Rwanda talk about themselves as untrustworthy, and because of this, they accept and enact a position of limited autonomy. Media actors describe media policy as being limited and unhelpful in terms of specific policy accomplishments, but they describe the general political attitude toward journalists as one that the journalism field deserves because of its involvement in the 1994 genocide. Journalists describe difficulty gathering information from sources and lack of support from audiences, and attribute these challenges to the deserved image inherited from their field’s role in the genocide. They also describe an audience that generally distrusts media products and journalists themselves. These narratives suggest that journalists in Rwanda draw boundaries of appropriateness that limit the power members of the field should acquire or exercise in ways that counter widely observed journalism norms of independence and autonomy. The finding is consistent with research showing that strong authoritarian parties and regimes with origins in mass conflict engender high levels of solidarity while fostering strong, party-dominated government systems, and that people in postconflict contexts tend to prioritize unity over division.

My findings are specific to Rwanda, but the consensus-oriented nature of Rwandan social and political systems has parallels in many other African countries. In addition to this cultural similarity, Rwanda’s successful development trajectory and economically effective authoritarian governance is likely to influence other countries in the region and perhaps the continent (Matfess, 2015). Kagame served as president of the African Union in 2018, leading the 55 heads of African states in a process of reform to create a “sustainable path to Africa’s transformation” (Tankou, 2018). My findings, then, describe a journalism field that may have many similarities with others across the continent, especially as leaders look to Rwandan governance to structure their own political systems. To the extent that this is the case, I suggest that African journalism in many places may be shaped more by collective narratives that are shared within and outside the field than by motivations to define and patrol professional boundaries; future research should explore this in more detail.

My findings also speak to the way journalism develops after conflict. Scholars have compared the Rwandan genocide with other instances of genocide and civil war,

including the German Holocaust, the Balkan wars of the 1990s, and the ethnic violence in the Darfur region of Sudan in the early 2000s (Straus, 2013; Thompson, 2019). There is some research on the development of media systems in these postconflict situations; for instance, in Germany after World War II, the news media were powerful tools of democratization and peacebuilding, while also spreading propaganda (Hartenian, 1987). However, comparative scholarship on the metajournalistic narratives and the resulting role perceptions and role enactment of journalists in postconflict and, in particular, postgenocidal countries is limited. This study is a case analysis, not a comparative study, but this is a fruitful area for future scholarship to explore—in the Rwandan context specifically and in postconflict situations more broadly.

These findings illuminate the ways that journalists in the specific context of Rwanda's sociopolitical environment define the boundaries of their field and understand their relationships with others. This study also underscores the complexity of boundary negotiations in a postconflict context, showing how journalists work to legitimize their field's low level of autonomy and power relative to that promoted by global journalism norms. Journalists explain restrictive media policy environments in the light of their social context. This study contributes to scholarly understanding of metajournalistic discourse by illuminating its characteristics in a particular context. It also identifies an important source of metajournalistic discourse—historical narratives about the field—and establishes a link between these narratives and contemporary field boundaries, extending scholarly understanding of journalism practice and the way journalists defend their field's boundaries, even when those boundaries are constrained.

Acknowledgment

The author thanks Amie Martinez and the anonymous JMCQ reviewers for valuable feedback on this manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was funded with a Boren Fellowship, a Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies research grant, and a Chester Fritz International Research Fellowship from the University of Washington.

ORCID iD

Ruth Moon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2170-7385>

Notes

1. The nature of Rwanda's governance is contested but the term “developmental authoritarian,” encompassing a “nominally democratic” government that provides “significant public

- works and services while exerting control over nearly every facet of society” (Matfess, 2015, p. 182) captures important characteristics of the political system agreed upon by a number of scholars who study Rwanda.
2. Moon (2019) draws from data collected as part of the same study.
 3. Interviews with journalists and observers confirmed the influential status of both publications on the Rwandan journalism field. Although neither the *New Times* nor *KT Press* are explicitly government owned, they are both considered progovernment (the *New Times* especially so), as are most major news outlets in Rwanda.
 4. Although this study is based on and draws conclusions about an elite, nonrepresentative sample of journalists, I suspect nonelite journalists share similar views about the powerful, negative role journalists played in the genocide and their own current roles. The majority of nonelite journalists in Rwanda work for radio stations and radio was a central tool of journalists’ role in the genocide, strengthening their link with past actors. In addition, elite journalists are the most likely field members to push for autonomy, as many have studied abroad and are fluent English speakers and foreign media consumers. In other words, elite journalists are most likely to be in a position to compare Rwandan journalism’s limited autonomy with the broader autonomy of journalists elsewhere.

References

- Aitamurto, T., & Varma, A. (2018). The constructive role of journalism: Contentious metadiscourse on constructive journalism and solutions journalism. *Journalism Practice, 12*(6), 695–713.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Carlson, M. (2014). Gone, but not forgotten: Memories of journalistic deviance as metajournalistic discourse. *Journalism Studies, 15*(1), 33–47.
- Carlson, M. (2016). Metajournalistic discourse and the meanings of journalism: Definitional control, boundary work, and legitimation. *Communication Theory, 26*(4), 349–368.
- Carlson, M. (2017). *Journalistic authority: Legitimizing news in the digital era*. Columbia University Press.
- Carlson, M., & Lewis, S. C. (2015). *Boundaries of journalism: Professionalism, practices and participation*. Routledge.
- Carlson, M., & Usher, N. (2016). News startups as agents of innovation: For-profit digital news startup manifestos as metajournalistic discourse. *Digital Journalism, 4*(5), 563–581.
- Carter, F. (1968). The press in Kenya. *Gazette (Leiden, Netherlands), 14*(2), 85–88.
- Central Intelligence Agency. (2020). *CIA world factbook: Rwanda*. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rw.html>
- Cook, T. E. (1998). *Governing with the news: The news media as a political institution*. University of Chicago Press.
- Cooper, F. (2002). *Africa since 1940: The past of the present* (Vol. 13). Cambridge University Press.
- Cruikshank, S. A. (2017). A developing chasm: Oppressive structures, media, and journalism in post-genocide Rwanda. *International Communication Research Journal, 52*(1), 31–56.
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review, 147*–160.
- Dyrstad, K. (2013). Does civil war breed authoritarian values? An empirical study of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Croatia. *Democratization, 20*(7), 1219–1242.

- The Economist. (2019, March 30). Don't ask, do tell; Ethnic labels in Rwanda. *The Economist*, 430(9136). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A580385792/BIC?u=lln_alsu&sid=BIC&xid=5bb335e7
- Economist Intelligence Unit. (2020). *Democracy Index 2019. A year of democratic setbacks and popular protest*. <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>
- Eldridge, S. A. (2014). Boundary maintenance and interloper media reaction: Differentiating between journalism's discursive enforcement processes. *Journalism Studies*, 15(1), 1–16.
- Fiedler, A., & Frère, M.-S. (2018). Press freedom in the African great lakes region: A comparative study of Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In H. M. Mabweazara (Ed.) *Newsmaking cultures in Africa* (pp. 119–143). Springer.
- Fiedler, C., & Mroß, K. (2017). *Post-conflict societies: Chances for peace and types of international support*. <https://www.die-gdi.de/en/briefing-paper/article/post-conflict-societies-chances-for-peace-and-types-of-international-support/>
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (2017). *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Routledge.
- Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hanitzsch, T., Hanusch, F., Ramaprasad, J., & De Beer, A. S. (2019). *Worlds of journalism: Journalistic cultures around the globe*. Columbia University Press.
- Hanitzsch, T., & Vos, T. P. (2017). Journalistic roles and the struggle over institutional identity: The discursive constitution of journalism. *Communication Theory*, 27(2), 115–135.
- Harber, A. (2014). *Legacy of Rwanda genocide includes media restrictions, self-censorship*. Committee to Protect Journalists / CPJ Reports.
- Hartenian, L. (1987). The role of media in democratizing Germany: United States occupation policy 1945-1949. *Central European History*, 20, 145–190.
- Hermida, A. (2013). #journalism: Reconfiguring journalism research about Twitter, one tweet at a time. *Digital Journalism*, 1(3), 295–313.
- Herod, A. (1999). Reflections on interviewing foreign elites: Praxis, positionality, validity, and the cult of the insider. *Geoforum*, 30(4), 313–327.
- Howard, P. N. (2002). Network ethnography and the hypermedia organization: New media, new organizations, new methods. *New Media & Society*, 4(4), 550–574.
- Hughes, S. (2003). From the inside out: How institutional entrepreneurs transformed Mexican journalism. *Harvard International Journal of Press/politics*, 8(3), 87–117.
- Hussey, M. (2016, April 6). Why Twitter should pay more attention to Africa. *The Next Web*. <https://thenextweb.com/africa/2016/04/06/twitter-finds-political-side-africa/>
- Johansson, E., & Nożewski, J. (2018). Polish and Swedish journalist-politician Twitter networks: Who are the gatekeepers? *Central European Journal of Communication*, 11(2), 129–150.
- Jose, A. B. (1975). Press freedom in Africa. *African Affairs*, 74(296), 255–262.
- Kellow, C. L., & Steeves, H. L. (1998). The role of radio in the Rwandan genocide. *Journal of Communication*, 48(3), 107–128.
- Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2002). Elections without democracy: The rise of competitive authoritarianism. *Journal of Democracy*, 13(2), 51–65.
- Lyons, T. (2016). From victorious rebels to strong authoritarian parties: Prospects for post-war democratization. *Democratization*, 23(6), 1026–1041.
- Mabweazara, H. M., & Mare, A. (2017). Researching the fluid and multisited appropriations of digital technologies in African newsrooms. In J. Tong, & S.-H. Lo (Eds.), *Digital technology and journalism* (pp. 317–345). Springer.

- Mamdani, M. (2001). *When victims become killers: Colonialism, nativism, and the genocide in Rwanda*. Princeton University Press.
- Matfess, H. (2015). Rwanda and Ethiopia: Developmental authoritarianism and the new politics of African strong men. *African Studies Review*, 58(2), 181–204.
- McIntyre, K., & Sobel, M. (2018). Reconstructing Rwanda: How Rwandan reporters use constructive journalism to promote peace. *Journalism Studies*, 19(14), 2126–2147.
- Michener, G. (2011). FOI laws around the world. *Journal of Democracy*, 22(2), 145–159.
- Moon, R. (2019). Beyond puppet journalism: The bridging work of transnational journalists in a local field. *Journalism Studies*, 20(12), 1714–1731.
- Musandu, P. (2018). *Pressing interests: The agenda and influence of a colonial East African newspaper sector*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Ndlela, N. (2009). African media research in the era of globalization. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 1(1), 55–68.
- Nyamnjoh, F. B. (2005). *Africa's media: Democracy and the politics of belonging*. Zed Books.
- Ofori-Parku, S. S., & Botwe, K. (2020). "This is (not) journalism": Corruption, subterfuge, and metajournalistic discourses on undercover journalism in Ghana. *Journalism Studies*, 21(3), 388–405.
- Prunier, G. (1997). *The Rwanda crisis: History of a genocide*. Columbia University Press.
- Puddington, A. (2017). *Breaking down democracy: Goals, strategies, and methods of modern authoritarians*. Freedom House.
- Purdeková, A. (2015). *Making ubumwe: Power, state and camps in Rwanda's unity-building project* (Vol. 34). Berghahn Books.
- Reich, Z., & Hanitzsch, T. (2013). Determinants of journalists' professional autonomy: Individual and national level factors matter more than organizational ones. *Mass Communication and Society*, 16(1), 133–156.
- Rønning, H., & Kupe, T. (2000). The dual legacy of democracy and authoritarianism: The media and the state in Zimbabwe. In J. Curran, & M.-J. Park (Eds.), *De-westernizing media studies* (pp. 157–177). Routledge.
- Scotton, J. F. (1973). The first African Press in East Africa: Protest and nationalism in Uganda in the 1920s. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 6(2), 211–228.
- Singer, J. B. (2007). Contested autonomy: Professional and popular claims on journalistic norms. *Journalism Studies*, 8(1), 79–95.
- Skjerdal, T. S., & Ngugi, C. M. (2007). Institutional and governmental challenges for journalism education in East Africa. *Ecquid Novi*, 28(1–2), 176–190.
- Sobel, M., & McIntyre, K. (2019). The state of journalism and press freedom in postgenocide Rwanda. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 96(2), 558–578.
- Straus, S. (2007). What is the relationship between hate radio and violence? Rethinking Rwanda's "radio machete." *Politics & Society*, 35(4), 609–637.
- Straus, S. (2013). *The order of genocide: Race, power, and war in Rwanda*. Cornell University Press.
- Straus, S. (2015). *Making and unmaking nations: War, leadership, and genocide in modern Africa*. Cornell University Press.
- Tankou, E. A. (2018). African Union to Launch 2018 as the African Anti-Corruption Year... [Press release]. <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20180122/african-union-launch-2018-african-anti-corruption-year%E2%80%A6>
- Thompson, A. (2007). *Media and the Rwanda genocide*. Pluto Press.
- Thompson, A. (Ed.). (2019). *Media and mass atrocity: The Rwanda genocide and beyond*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

- Vergeer, M. (2015). Peers and sources as social capital in the production of news: Online social networks as communities of journalists. *Social Science Computer Review*, 33(3), 277–297.
- Waisbord, S. (2013). *Reinventing professionalism: Journalism and news in global perspective*. John Wiley.
- Zelizer, B. (1993). Journalists as interpretive communities. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 10(3), 219–237.

Author Biography

Ruth Moon (PhD, University of Washington) is an assistant professor of media and public affairs at Louisiana State University. She studies journalists and the constraints and incentives that shape their work, particularly in non-democratic and semi-democratic countries with limited technology infrastructure. She has published research in *Journalism Studies*, *Journalism, Information, Communication & Society*, and *International Journal of Communication*.