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Moto-Taxis, Drivers, Weather, and WhatsApp: Contextualizing New Technology in Rwandan Newsrooms

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ABSTRACT

Journalists adopt new technologies amid the limitations and structure of their existing tools. This study uses organizational sociology and actor-network theory to examine the infrastructure supporting journalists' newsgathering in two Rwandan newsrooms, highlighting the role of the messaging platform WhatsApp. The network, which includes editors, sources, reporters, weather, vehicles, drivers, moto-taxis, WhatsApp, and petty cash, encourages journalists to gather news from predictable events. In this newsgathering network, WhatsApp allows reporters and editors to coordinate with each other, gather news, and influence newsroom behaviour. However, the platform does not overcome physical limitations such as transportation problems, which contribute major obstacles to newsgathering, even at wealthy organizations. In this network, WhatsApp extends the communication capabilities of journalists but is moderated by existing social relationships and subject to physical constraints as a result of those relationships. This study shows how physical and social contexts influence newsgathering and production. It also reinforces the importance of context in understanding how new tools are adopted into news production networks.

KEYWORDS

Global journalism;
technology; Rwanda;
reporting; infrastructure;
actor-network theory;
WhatsApp; social
relationships

In March 2017, Caleb,¹ an editor at *KT Press*, got a tip. A friend of his, a senior government administrator, sent a message through WhatsApp about a scandal brewing on Rwanda's eastern border. The friend shared the tip on background, not on the record, so the editor assigned a reporter to follow up by phone. The reporter called the mayor of the scandal-plagued district and the mayor's supervisor. The supervisor was "very hostile. He was like, 'There are other things to write about, why should you choose this,' that sort of thing," Caleb said. He considered sending a reporter to the border to verify the story, because without eyewitness reports, government officials would probably criticize *KT Press* for "reporting things that don't exist." But the idea was daunting:

It's very far away ... the bus goes there once a week. So that means if he has to go there, he has to get either a vehicle, which is more expensive, or a motorcycle. A motorcycle is about 25,000 RWF.² We don't have that kind of money. So we said, "That's

it, let's leave the story, let's concentrate on other things." (personal communication, March 27, 2017)

This news story that never materialized illustrates the complex newsgathering process in Rwanda and the context within which the virtual communication platform WhatsApp joins the Rwandan reporter's toolkit. WhatsApp is an important newsgathering tool, but it has limits: the editor needed an eyewitness to confirm the story, on the record, in order to publish, and material limitations intervened to halt the process.

These material challenges of newsgathering are not unique to Rwanda. Sub-Saharan Africa is the most expensive world region in which to conduct business, due in part to the high cost of infrastructure services (Ajakaiye and Ncube 2010). Infrastructure has developed more slowly than in comparable regions, and it remains limited and low-quality (Calderón and Servén 2010; Platteau 1996). High cost contributes to low levels of access and the accessibility of paved roads, reliable electricity, and telephone access decreased from 1991 to 2005 (Calderón and Servén 2010; Ajakaiye and Ncube 2010). While information communication technologies can resolve some problems, as when cell phones circumvent the need to access landline telephones, they "cannot leapfrog beyond the ordinary development problems Africans are faced with" (Alzouma 2005, 351; Hyde-Clarke and Van Tonder 2011). Rwanda's infrastructure quality (52.0 out of 100) is roughly the average of the entire African continent (49.4 out of 100), so many of the material challenges that reporters face here are likely shared across the continent and, to a lesser degree, in developing countries around the world (Global Infrastructure Hub 2020).

This study examines the infrastructure and devices Rwandan journalists use in their daily reporting and the editorial routines at two news organizations, with an aim to understand the utility and limitations of WhatsApp as a digital tool. I explore the ways journalists adopt particular devices and platforms from a perspective grounded in local context and situated in journalism theory (Atton and Mabweazara 2011). Using theory from media and organizational sociology, an ontological and methodological approach informed by actor-network theory, and fieldwork data, this study answers the questions: What does the infrastructure of reporting look like in Rwanda? And how does WhatsApp fit in that network?

The answers illuminate Rwandan journalists' values, newsroom priorities, and power relations. I find that WhatsApp is part of the infrastructure of reporting but enhances rather than replacing the value of proximity, which has an important social dimension in addition to its physical connotations. In addition, WhatsApp extends editorial surveillance and strengthens hierarchical newsroom control. These findings suggest that the digital space created by WhatsApp is moderated by social relationships. The platform enables coordination and instruction within the defined social hierarchy of the newsroom, but it does not replace physical presence in newsgathering, where the social hierarchy is contested. This study makes two main theoretical contributions. First, it elaborates on the importance of performative proximity as a reporting tool in unstable and weak journalism fields. Second, it highlights the ways that reporting infrastructure reinforces power dynamics and hierarchies to affect newsgathering and production.

Technology and Journalistic Authority in Reporting

News production begins with the reporting process. Journalists claim to produce “reliable, neutral, and current factual information”; to do this they rely on reporting, “producing a considerable body of knowledge in a short span of time for regular distribution at given points in time” (Ekström 2002, 270). The eyewitness perspective is crucial to this process in that it conveys and builds journalistic authority: “the crafting of a news story draws from an ability to see events unfold” (Zelizer 2007, 410). The journalist’s five senses, deployed via physical presence, form a perpetually important source of information for storytelling in disaster reporting (Cottle 2013). While journalistic witnessing is particularly evident in the context of disaster, breaking news, and other unpredictable events, the witnessing imperative extends to journalistic reporting more broadly; Matt Carlson notes that “bodily presence underpins claims to journalistic authority” (Carlson 2017, 152). Technology allows different kinds of witnessing—for instance, through unmanned cameras and citizen journalists—but does not negate its importance (Allan, Sonwalkar, and Carter 2007). Rather, technology enforces and extends the imperative of physical presence. For instance, contemporary war correspondents are expected to be physically present in remote locations, filing stories via advances in network technology (Palmer 2018).

Digital technology enhances rather than subduing the power of proximity across a number of dimensions. Place-based references become more important signals of legitimacy in digital contexts and place-based knowledge is increasingly important to journalism (Davidson and Poor 2019; Schmitz Weiss 2015). Proximity becomes an enhanced newsgathering priority among local journalists (Jenkins and Nielsen 2020). Proximity gains new dimensions as well, extending beyond the traditional news value of geographical closeness to social, political, temporal, and other facets (Ahva and Pantti 2014). Eyewitnessing becomes a tool not just of news value but of social value, reinforcing symbolic and relational power via performative proximity—“an orchestrated moment that compresses places and people of meaning in time to reinforce power among those that are present” (Gutsche and Hess 2018, 74; Ceron et al. 2019). In this performative dimension, actors conduct off-stage negotiation and manoeuvres that allow “elite agents to reassemble, take a bow, and reinforce the status quo of dominant ideology” (Gutsche and Hess 2018, 75). Digital tools enhance the complexity of proximity, adding new dimensions along which journalists and other social actors may signal their authority. Amid an increasingly digitally driven production environment, proximity—in physical and other dimensions—remains vital to journalism and journalism studies.

While digital technologies do not override news values, they do provide new methods for information-gathering. In the United States, new databases and fax machines sped up reporting, but journalists continued to rely on internal clipping files, interviews with official sources, and routine news frames to research and produce breaking news (Hansen et al. 1994). Even with the option of new technologies that might allow them to avoid direct contact with sources, Israeli journalists tend to prefer reporting practices that enable “copresence” (Reich 2013). Greek journalists use online tools to increase their audience outreach, but only within the limits allowed by a professional culture that elevates traditional top-down, authority-oriented approaches to

newsgathering over the innovative, audience-oriented practices the tools could encourage (Spyridou et al. 2013). Reporters use Twitter to innovate, but do so within the structure of pervasive professional conventions (Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012).

In sum, technology allows journalists to extend and adapt conventional reporting tactics while maintaining and even enhancing fundamental values and priorities. It is thus important to situate studies of technologies and platforms within the complex contexts of particular situations. Journalistic norms such as the importance of witnessing form an important part of the context that guides adoption. This study examines the particular context of reporting in Rwanda and the role of WhatsApp in that process.

Technology as a Site of Newsroom Control

Communication technology can extend or replace physical spaces, including newsrooms and other workplaces. This means that contemporary communities are as much socially constructed as physically structured; communication technologies extend the power of physical space into the virtual realm (Appadurai 1996). Geography no longer completely defines location; organizational activity “weaves in and out of actual and digital space” (Sassen 2007, 228). Contemporary places are composed not only of physical sites but also from the relationships that occur in those spaces, and “a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself” (Massey 1994, 28). Digital communication technologies, including WhatsApp, have the potential to make social spaces—including the site of the newsroom—fluid, pulling them into journalists’ consciousnesses even when they are outside of the physical gathering space.

In this context, technological developments can extend social control beyond the physical newsroom; for instance, in the United States after World War I, “mobile” phones in radio-cars granted greater mobility to reporters while at the same time tethering them to the newsroom and strengthening remote editorial access and oversight (Mari 2018). More recently, Thomson-Reuters wire managers used digital communication tools to maintain constant communication with bureau staff across countries and continents and to reinforce organizational priorities (Bunce 2019). Internal communication platforms like Slack can serve as tools for newsroom communication while also facilitating greater managerial oversight (Bunce, Wright, and Scott 2018). These examples highlight communication technology as a mechanism of managerial control—a tool used to “direct attention, motivate, and encourage individuals to act in ways that support the organization’s objectives” (Cardinal, Kreutzer, and Miller 2017, 559). Technology extends the capacity for control into virtual space.

Situating Tools in Context

My approach to understanding Rwandan journalists’ reporting processes is informed by actor-network theory (ANT), which provides a toolkit for understanding “sources of stability and contingency in ... journalistic practice” (Latour 2007, 379). ANT

illuminates the power that technologies such as content management systems and other materials have in shaping routines and behaviour (Anderson and Kreiss 2013). This approach examines how the interactions of physical objects with human actors and social forces create particular patterns of practice (Prior 2008). Its object-orientation examines digital tools as a way to further understand the “social, material, and cultural context” as well as the power dynamics of journalism in particular contexts (Anderson and De Maeyer 2015, 4). ANT posits that people, ideals, symbolic constructions, and material objects all matter in considering a particular outcome; an actor is anything “that acts or to which activity is granted by others” (Plesner 2009; Latour 1996, 373).

In this context, news can be considered the product of a multi-step network, of which reporting is an early step, itself composed of a network of actors, as illuminated by Archetti (2014) and others. I focus on this network, examining in particular the infrastructure of reporting—the “boring things” that underly the commonplace journalistic activity of achieving copresence (Bowker and Star 2000; Star 1999, 377). Infrastructure consists of embedded tools and processes that are stable across tasks and generally invisible or taken-for-granted, though they become visible upon breakdown (Star 1999). I treat the infrastructure primarily as artefacts, including various modes of transportation and communication tools along with environmental factors as elements affecting the process of newsgathering; I also treat WhatsApp as a “trace or record of activities,” using the chat transcript to reconstruct and add meaning to reporting routines (Star 1999, 387). My goal is to shed light on the “back stage work” that goes into reporting for the Rwandan journalist and to interrogate the ways this work shapes news production (Star 2010, 607).

The ANT approach encourages detailed understanding of specific technologies and the ways they influence work processes, focussing on the ways networks of humans and non-humans influence outcomes. ANT grants agency to both technological and human actors, allowing for technology to shape work practices and for humans to adapt various tools to their own goals (Lievrouw 2014). I adopt this perspective to examine “who *and what*” shape the newsgathering process of Rwandan journalists (Primo and Zago 2015, 49).

Newsgathering in Rwanda

The Rwandan media environment is influenced by the history of the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi, popular platforms including WhatsApp, a strong central state that enforces a high degree of surveillance, and infrastructure characteristics including the high cost of mobile phone talk time, low rates of vehicle ownership, and frequency of rainy downpours. During the genocide, an estimated 800,000 to one million people, primarily of Tutsi ethnicity, were murdered over a 100-day span (Prunier 1997). Leading up to the genocide, government officials used popular media outlets to cultivate distrust and ethnic division (Kellow and Steeves 1998). During the genocide, officials and popular media personalities used those outlets to coordinate violence (Thompson 2007). The constitution instituted after the genocide explicitly addressed media coverage, banning defamation and discussions of ethnicity or discrimination

(Cruikshank 2017; Harber 2014). As a result, Rwandan journalists face pressure to satisfy government officials and business interests in their news coverage (Moon 2019). They also share an understanding that the journalism profession is untrustworthy and relatively low in the Rwandan social hierarchy (Moon 2021).

Rwandans, like others across the African continent, use WhatsApp frequently to communicate with groups and individuals. This data-based messaging platform was created in the late 2000s, and by 2014 it was the most globally popular messaging app available, with 600 million users (Olson 2014). By February 2020, it had two billion active users around the world (Singh 2020). WhatsApp allows individual communication and group distribution. Journalists now use it for a variety of goals, including sourcing and audience outreach (Boczek and Koppers 2020; McIntyre and Sobel 2019). In Chile, for instance, journalists use WhatsApp to gather information virtually in lieu of face-to-face interactions (Dodds 2019). Across the African continent, WhatsApp is used for education, medical communication, and more; the platform's user-friendly design and low data use have been highlighted as features that contribute to its success (Shambare 2014). WhatsApp also has the benefit of encryption for messaging security, though that affordance breaks down in Rwanda and other contexts of state surveillance.

The Rwandan state practices regular surveillance, imposing "increasing state presence" on daily life, especially since the genocide (Purdeková 2016, 68). This approach influences how WhatsApp might be adopted, particularly since the app has been the source of leaks releasing information on Rwandan political dissidents. In October 2019, Facebook (WhatsApp's parent company) sued Israeli spy company NSO, accusing the organization of exploiting a loophole in WhatsApp security to download spyware on target phones in April and May 2019. Targets included political dissidents, journalists, and human rights actors, including several high-profile Rwandan dissidents (Srivastava and Wilson 2019). In 2017, Violette Uwamohoro, a Rwandan-British dual citizen, was arrested in Kigali and detained for several weeks partly on evidence obtained from WhatsApp messages (AT Editor 2017). WhatsApp was used in court again in 2018, when Rwanda's High Court ruled that Diane Rwigara, a government critic and opposition leader who was disqualified from running for president in 2017 by allegedly forging signatures on an application form, could not be prosecuted for WhatsApp messages as they were protected private communication (BBC 2018). Research in other contexts has found that journalists doubt the security of digital messaging and generally prefer face-to-face communication when discussing sensitive topics with sources, as "anything digital, even if encrypted, can leave an information trail that could be intercepted" (Waters 2018, 1309). Munoriyarwa and Chiumbu (2019) likewise found that real or perceived government surveillance dampened Zimbabwean journalists' reliance on and trust in digital technologies for reporting.

In addition to the historical and political context, Rwandan journalists face material challenges to newsgathering from technological infrastructure, weather, and transportation availability. The Rwandan government encourages technological innovation and mobile broadband use but rates of adoption are low (Gagliardone and Golooba-Mutebi 2016). According to a report by ICT Africa, in 2017 Rwanda's mobile broadband costs were among the cheapest in Africa but were still nearly twice as expensive as

Egypt, which had the cheapest broadband on the continent (and a much higher GDP per capita) (Mothobi 2017; World Bank 2020). The relatively high price of broadband may have contributed to its low adoption rate across the country, with unique broadband subscriptions at 9% of the population in 2014 and mobile penetration at 25% in 2015 (Mothobi 2017; Gagliardone and Golooba-Mutebi 2016). In addition to the expense of acquiring a mobile phone, usage is billed by the minute, and users pay for at least one minute to connect a call (Björkegren 2019). Airtime is expensive—\$0.25 per minute in 2009—and Rwandans spend relatively little time talking on the phone, averaging two minutes per day per cell phone user from 2005 to 2009 (Blumenstock, Gillick, and Eagle 2010).

Inclement weather is also common. Rwanda has two rainy seasons, which run from September through December and from March through May, and Kigali averages 150 to 180 rainy days annually (Muhire et al. 2018). Rain is sudden and heavy, occasionally flooding roads and sidewalks in town (Kwizera 2020). This combined with low rates of vehicle ownership and high dependence on motorcycle taxis makes transportation unreliable. In 2013 there were 40,585 personal cars and light four-wheel vehicles registered in Rwanda, for an average of about three vehicles per 1,000 residents (WHO 2013). While vehicle ownership is concentrated in Kigali and the rate might be higher among employed journalists, vehicle ownership was important and unusual in the two fairly wealthy newsrooms I observed. Kigali's bus system introduced constraints in the form of transit delays or route stops far from a destination (Times Reporter 2017). Motorcycle taxis ("motos") were popular and inexpensive but also constrained, often by weather. Car taxis were much more expensive and rarely considered a plausible transportation solution. On top of these factors, access roads to remote areas are sometimes simply impassable to vehicles (Rollason 2017). Rwandan journalism is shaped by these material and social constraints.

Method and Field Sites

This article draws on data from a three-month observation period in the newsrooms of two Rwandan news organizations—*The New Times* and *KT Press*—along with semi-structured interviews with 15 staff at these organizations (seven from *The New Times* and eight from *KT Press*), conducted from February through April 2017, and transcripts of the main editorial WhatsApp group for each organization from this period. At each organization I interviewed the senior editor, several section editors (mid-level managers), and several newsgathering staff (including reporters and photographers).³ I requested access to each newsroom's main editorial WhatsApp group, which included all editorial employees for the organization. Both *KT Press* and *The New Times* added me to their groups, introducing me as a researcher, soon after I began physical observations; they removed me from each group after my observation time concluded. While everyone in each WhatsApp group knew who I was and why I was present, not everyone explicitly consented to be observed. Observations and quotes included in this article came from research subjects who consented to the study. I was in *The New Times'* group from February six through March 21, 2017, and in the *KT Press* group from March 20 through April 26, 2017. During that time, the *KT Press* team shared 314

lines of messaging and the *New Times* team shared 1986 lines.⁴ Messages, like newsroom conversations, took place in three languages: English, French, and Kinyarwanda. I am a native English speaker; I speak French moderately well, and very little Kinyarwanda. As a result, my analyses focus primarily on English-language messages. Where I include Kinyarwanda phrases and translations in the below analysis, translations have been confirmed by Rwandans.

During the observation period I spent an average of 20 h per week in newsrooms, primarily observing but occasionally copyediting or leading skills workshops. I attended editorial meetings and accompanied reporters to events in the field, including a public transportation press conference, parliamentary hearings, and other formal events. I interviewed editors, reporters, and photographers to better understand the dynamics and processes I observed. Interviews, which lasted 30 to 90 min, were conducted in English, recorded, and transcribed for analysis. Data were analysed using a combination of textual methods, including keyword-in-context analysis and a constant comparative analysis to generate understanding of WhatsApp use (Glaser and Strauss 2017).

The two news organizations this study examines—the *New Times* and *KT Press*—were identified as influential news organizations through a network ethnography seeded with Twitter data (Howard 2002). I confirmed their influence with Rwandan journalism professors and media development personnel. This sample of two elite organizations is not representative of the Rwandan news field; rather, it provides a window into practices at two organizations that are socially and financially stable in a generally precarious field. Since organizations tend to mimic the practices of successful peers, these companies' strategies likely influence other Rwandan media organizations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

The *New Times* is an English-language daily newspaper founded shortly after the genocide, with a reputation for being one of the most well-paying and reliably financed news organizations in Rwanda. While news from this organization is generally considered to be government-aligned, pressure to produce this kind of news comes primarily from advertisers, many of whom are government organizations. News produced by the *New Times* is often picked up by other news organizations, including broadcast outlets that reach remote audiences in Rwanda. *Kigali Today*, an online-only publication with a Kinyarwanda-language breaking news team and an English-language investigative team (*KT Press*), is a younger organization seeking to lead the Rwandan news field in enterprise and investigative reporting (while still bound by major financial restrictions imposed by the advertising field).

Analysis

Rwandan reporters navigate a number of newsgathering challenges presented by weather, vehicle shortages, and network infrastructure. I analyse a *New Times* team covering an education press conference, a rainy Saturday at *KT Press*, and breaking news reporting and editorial communication to show that, in spite of these material and infrastructural constraints, journalists use WhatsApp to coordinate, not to replace, physical presence in reporting. Where WhatsApp does supplement physical presence

is with intra-newsroom relationships: in those contexts, it extends the physical newsroom—in particular, the editorial meeting—to virtual space. These findings suggest that WhatsApp enables performative proximity and reinforces, rather than flattening or subverting, existing social relationships.

Rainy Days and the Reporter: The Importance of Getting There

A rainy Thursday at *KT Press* illustrates the importance of physical proximity, a mandate that not only influences event attendance but also affects other assignments. In this sequence of events, vehicle transportation and “imvugo” (rain) are central characters. Because of their weather and transportation context, weather delays were a frequent and acceptable reason to miss a meeting or arrive late. I experienced this as well: I frequently rode motorcycle taxis to and from meetings, and when it began to rain during a trip, the moto driver usually stopped to wait in a shop or under an awning until the rain passed. When I could convince a driver to continue in spite of the rain, he typically raised his fee to account for the conditions and the moto might wash out on a steep, muddy road en route to our destination.

On March 23, a *KT Press* reporter (A.) assigned to a story on widows of the Rwandan genocide—one of several stories budgeted for an early April genocide history story package—ran into a weather problem. The company driver who was assigned to take her out of the city to interview women for the article had “some trouble” and couldn’t drive her. To overcome this challenge, a different reporter (G.) who owned a vehicle was reassigned to drive and gather additional information for the story, thus coopting two reporters for a one-person assignment. This disrupted other plans, as can be seen in the following WhatsApp exchange, where an editor attempts to assign coverage of a court case:

Editor: Editors ... prepare ... Uwamahoro is in court right now. just been informed G. is on his way right now going there

Editor: Lets have story from there AS MATTER OF PRIORITY

News editor: G. is supposed to cover the Avega story with A. They are waiting for the person that will take them frm avega

News editor.: Let’s them connect with X. and then drop him at court

Editor: NO!!! I asked him to go to Rusororo court

News editor.: X. tumaze kuvugana (I have already spoken with X.)

Editor: G. yagiyeyo kuko afite imodoka. (G. went there because he has a car)

Editor: Kandi (furthermore) it was raining ...

In this discussion, the head editor and a news editor negotiate coverage for the day. G. would have been sent to cover a court case, but he could not attend because he was accompanying A. out of town to write the feature story. Meanwhile, X., who could be a backup reporter to cover the court case, needed a ride to court (located in Rusororo, a Kigali suburb about 25 kilometres or 45 min away from the office), partly because of the rain. In the end, G. was reassigned to cover the court case, delaying the out-of-town story with A. This observation reveals the power of weather, especially

rain, to shape news coverage. While individuals would react in frustration when weather changed behaviour or resulted in a missed story opportunity, rain was generally an entirely legitimate reason for being late somewhere. On another day, a reporter messaged the *KT Press* newsroom group on WhatsApp: “Good morning. Editors ... this morning rain is blocking me from leaving home. It seems I won’t make it for this RDF/CSS story at 8am as u assigned me. Let me know if there’s any plan B” (WhatsApp transcript, March 30, 2017). Rwanda’s lengthy rainy seasons meant that for about half of the year reporters would have to factor weather into their plans for reporting stories and might find rain preventing them in one way or another from attending scheduled events.

As these illustrations show, weather—in the Rwandan context, heavy rain—disrupts the network of information-gathering that enables physical presence by stalling or even preventing regular transportation routines. Reporters turn to the virtual space of WhatsApp to explain the disruption and resolve the coverage when possible. However, neither reporters nor editors suggest using WhatsApp to replace physical presence in reporting a story. *New Times* staff shared a similar focus on physical attendance. Journalists went to great lengths to appear in person, particularly at events, and might postpone reporting that was not event-linked when the two conflicted.

These vignettes highlight this article’s first theoretical contribution: weather and infrastructure are meaningful actors in journalistic newsgathering networks. They not only present obstacles to ideal newsgathering processes; they also shape and change those processes to reinforce the predominance of certain kinds of news in the final product. In the case of Rwanda, rain and transportation infrastructure are specific manifestations of weather and infrastructure that change reporters’ schedules on a regular basis, causing them to miss assignments and spend time waiting for drivers and negotiating carpool destinations, and reinforcing the predominance of pack reporting, even within one news outlet. These examples also illustrate particular constraints and affordances of WhatsApp in the newsgathering context. The platform allows editorial staff across Kigali to coordinate access without coming to the same room for a planning meeting on a rainy morning. However, it also enhances misinterpretation and misunderstanding, as when reporters at *KT Press* were reassigned offline to adjust to vehicle mishaps and emerging needs without discussion in a central space.

Physical Presence and Source Relationships

Reporters at both *KT Press* and *The New Times* often received assignments to cover an event for their day’s work. These included press conferences, court proceedings, parliamentary hearings, speeches, and other events. To cover these assignments, reporters worked hard to *be there* rather than waiting for press releases or other documentation, or otherwise gathering information remotely. For these assignments, reporters shared background information and coordinated logistics over WhatsApp. These encounters by extension highlight the value of physical presence in Rwandan reporting. When limited infrastructure and resources challenge the ability of journalists to attend events, presence tends to take precedence, even when it prevents reporters from

contacting additional sources or shortens the amount of time they have to write and file stories.

In February, I accompanied *New Times* staff to the offices of the Ministry of Education to hear the results of national A-level examinations. Several reporters and a photographer had been assigned to cover the event; one reporter was writing an English-language story for the newspaper, and one was writing in Kinyarwanda for the Web. Before we could leave the office, five reporters and a photographer spent 10 min negotiating who would ride in the shared car and who the driver should drop off first. Two reporters and a photographer wanted to go to the Ministry of Education. A third reporter needed to be dropped off at a different government office. A fifth person wanted to go to MTN Centre (a shopping hub in the Kigali city centre). Not everyone would fit in the car; eventually, one person got out and hailed a moto taxi. When the rest of us had piled in, we pulled out onto the main road, where a debate commenced in Kinyarwanda about where the driver should stop first—MTN Centre or the Ministry of Education. Eventually, the four of us arrived at the ministry buildings in time for the press conference, which consisted of several officials delivering remarks to a packed room of reporters with TV cameras and notebooks.

Afterward, we re-negotiated transportation back to the newsroom. In the parking lot of the Ministry of Education, we waited for the company driver again; a reporter called him to learn that the driver was near the MTN Centre across town and asked him to call when he made it to Kimihurura, where we were waiting. We waited about 10 min before the reporter decided it was taking too long and we should take motos back to the office so he could write the story. We headed behind the ministry of immigration to a moto-taxi stop, where each of us took a separate moto taxi back to the office.

This scene illustrates the everyday challenge of getting to and from events in Kigali. At both the *New Times* and *KT Press*, “transport” (petty cash to reimburse transportation costs for individual reporters) was available but had to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis, so reporters tended to avoid paying for their own taxis if possible, instead relying on the company car and driver to drop them off for assignments. However, the circuit-driving practice of the *New Times*’ company driver meant that reporters would spend valuable time waiting on a ride or sitting in a vehicle for additional stops rather than getting quickly from the newsroom to and from assignments. As a result, events coverage tended to take a great deal of time and reporters, photographers, and editors would have to negotiate pick-up, drop-off, and carpooling to accommodate a variety of assignments and deadlines.

Sometimes a shortage of drivers and vehicles meant one driver’s illness or car trouble prevented story coverage; however, even reporters depending on fully functional drivers and vehicles would often have to wait for drivers to make a circuit to drop off or pick up several reporters on assignment before they could all arrive at their destinations. In the process, reporters spent 20 to 30 min and up to several hours in transit or waiting for transportation. Once they arrived, they might wait hours for events that had been delayed, as indicated by this message from a *New Times* reporter on February 25:

I'm tired. This miss rwanda was supposed to start by 5pm, I arrived before that time and some came early but now look it's 8pm we don't even know if they will start. They can't even apologize for their delaying. (WhatsApp message, February 25, 8:09 p.m.)

Coupled with spotty internet access, this meant reporters would have to cut writing time short to file stories by their deadlines. A reporter at *The New Times* summed up these limitations:

I go with my computer but maybe don't have Internet so that I can send a story, or let's say I go there but I don't have time to sit and type a story because of the time frame of when I left and when I thought I would be back. And when you are going to an event and you wish to wait for a driver to come by and pick you, that takes time. And [sometimes] you are waiting for someone that will be doing a [different] story. (Personal Communication, February 20, 2017)

Transportation introduced roadblocks to the end goal of timely delivery of a story for production. First, an assignment might be far away, requiring time to travel. Second, internet access might be limited at the site, especially if it was in a remote location, preventing the reporter from finishing an article to file remotely; while wireless tethering was occasionally possible, this would typically be funded out of a reporter's own wallet with the prepaid data plans common in Rwanda. Finally, the reporter might need to wait on a driver to return to the site or for another journalist in the carpool to complete his or her reporting for a different assignment before the vehicle could return to the office and everyone could write and file their articles.⁵

These observations illustrate journalists' willingness to overcome barriers and accept work limitations to achieve physical presence. This supports the journalism studies literature in finding that physical presence is often more desirable than virtual presence. It also supports existing research in showing that physical presence in Rwanda is instrumentally valuable—it is valued and practiced not as an end in itself but because it leads to a desirable outcome. Much of the existing literature on presence suggest that it is valuable because it strengthens journalists' credibility and thus, their relationship with audiences. In Rwanda, physical presence retains its instrumental value; journalists are not rewarded exclusively for *being* somewhere but for the content they produce based on that event. Journalists complain when being somewhere seems unlikely to result in a story (as in the February 25 WhatsApp message and the personal conversation from February 20 recounted above). Their performance is measured based on output, even if an event has been delayed, transportation is slow, or other physical factors reduce efficiency or ease of access (Moon 2019). However, this research suggests a new facet to performative proximity—not only reinforcing power among those present, but also reinforcing hierarchy among social actors.

These examples illustrate how infrastructure—in this case, weather and transportation access—compounds inequality and hierarchies in Rwandan reporting. Events take precedence over other enterprise and investigation-oriented reporting activities, highlighting the importance of temporal proximity in reporting. Heavy rain and lack of transportation influence who can get to events and, once the reporter arrives, those infrastructure limitations reinforce the power of the source over the journalist while technology allows them to share frustration with their peers. This is evident in one reporter waiting more than three hours for a delayed press conference and another's

explanation that waiting for transportation would often reduce the time and hence the level of reporting and quality of writing he could achieve for a story. In short, technology can enhance performative power distance and reinforce lack of power as much as it can encourage and construct performative proximity around shared power.

Reporter Relationships and WhatsApp

WhatsApp's limits and value further crystallize in an examination of breaking news coverage. Here, the platform enables information exchange and reporting guidance. In this context, hierarchical editorial relationships—from editor/boss to reporter/employee—drive the tone and content of conversations.

When a fire broke out at a prison in the Kigali neighbourhood of Kimironko in late March, *New Times* reporters shared speculation and information collected from friends, neighbours, and colleagues in the newsroom's WhatsApp channel to aid in reporting. The conversation began around 9 a.m. when a reporter shared a photo showing a cloud of smoke rising in the distance over a hillside in Kigali. Over the following hour, a conversation unfolded over WhatsApp where reporters who were close to the scene shared photos and commentary, often with conflicting information, along with unverified information and details gleaned from other news outlets.

9:01: Editor 1: Caption plz

9:02: Editor 2: I have just seen the fire truck drive by office with the sirens on

9:03: Reporter 2: Kimironko prison on fire

9:03: Editor 1: Its gereza kimironko (Kimironko prison)

9:03: Editor 1: we need pics

9:04: Reporter 1: There's fire at kimironko prison

9:06: Editor 2: Can we tweet that? Whose pictures?

9:10: Reporter 2: @lzuba We're tweeting

9:18: Editor 2: How about TNT?

(From 9:18 to 10:01 a.m., reporters shared snippets of information; some of it was sourced: "A motorist tells me that when it started people started running toward the prison," while some was presented as an eyewitness account: "There is a road block at Isangano and another at Mushimire's" and some was speculative: "Gunshots might have been heard over there!")

10:02: Editor 3: Any injuries, do you see ambulances taking some people? Have some prisoners escaped?

10:04: Reporter 3: They have cut us off

10:05: Reporter 3: Deployment of ordinary police and traffic chaos all over

10:17: Reporter 4: No gunshots said George Rwigamba

11:18: Reporter 3, responding to Reporter 4: Yet Busingye said gunshots were fired to control the crowd

This chat thread showcases the use of WhatsApp as a newsgathering tool, highlighting its value and its pitfalls. Several reporters add bits of information to the developing story, including photos. They also share their own coverage (Izuba Rirashe is a Kinyarwanda publication of *The New Times*).⁶ In this vignette, WhatsApp is a useful space to collect breaking news. Reporters share information they gather and editors interject questions to guide reporting. Some of the information might show up in a published news report—but then again, it might not. A *New Times* article about the fire, published online later that day, relied almost exclusively on information sourced to George Rwigamba, Commissioner General of Rwanda Correctional Services, rather than to eyewitness information or quotes gathered from the area.

In the Kimironko prison episode described above, editors pushed reporters to construct a narrative of the events and to publish content quickly. This type of editorial guidance happened frequently, especially at the *New Times*; on February 21, a reporter sent an update from another press conference that proceeded as follows:

Reporter: Happening: VP of India speaking at UR college of Science and Technology (attached six photos)

Editor: [Reporter] these are the same photos

Editor: Give us the message he is giving to the students

Reporter: I wasn't sure about quality of each. But I tried to take different angles

Editor: ok, u can also use your phone to get us an amateur video.

Reporter: Sawa (OK)

Reporter: He is now taking questions. It will be hard to quote him. But generally, he talked about [continues with summary of talking points]

Editor: [👉 👉 👉]

An editor again steps in to direct a reporter's newsgathering efforts as they unfold in real time, requesting particular types of content, asking for good quotes, and otherwise guiding the process.

The Kimironko fire broke out relatively near the *New Times* office, so it drew conversation from newsroom staff who happened to be nearby. The press conference also took place in Kigali. However, editors also used WhatsApp to encourage and coordinate newsgathering in other regions, where well-connected reporters might hear about news ahead of official updates from fire departments, police officials, or other government officials. While virtual technology alone would not ensure news coverage, it could be useful when someone was physically present to capture information with it, as when a police shooting occurred in a remote area. "We have phones everywhere, so this guy picked a photo, and he sent the photo to our guy, and our guy sent us the information," and *KT Press* published the story, the editor recounted (personal communication, March 27).

WhatsApp could be useful as a reporting tool for individual interviews, but *New Times* reporters and editors often discussed the slow and unreliable nature of virtual overtures. In a February eight editorial meeting, a reporter who had planned a follow-up news story said a key source had promised to provide him information over email the previous day but had never responded to the reporter's list of questions. A few

days later, I watched a reporter try to update a story he had posted online earlier that morning; the story involved a U.S. court trial related to genocide crimes, and he was looking for a local comment from a genocide survivors association or a Rwandan prosecutor about the trial and sentencing. He stepped in and out of the office with his cell phone to make a number of calls but didn't get a response (a common challenge). Reporters occasionally used WhatsApp for interviews but treated its texting function with a dose of scepticism, saying they could not be sure who was responding to messages—it could be an official's spouse or child, for instance. And while reporters at *The New Times* and *KT Press* would be unlikely to conduct interviews criticizing the government, journalists with more sceptical positions towards the government also said they did not trust that WhatsApp data would be secure from government oversight. In this context, physical presence alleviates concerns about authorship and reliability, and it also ensures that reporters get access to quotes and other information that may be delayed or never arrive virtually.

These examples highlight the ways that WhatsApp is useful in facilitating information-gathering and sharing within an established social group (as in the newsroom) but becomes less reliable as a reporting tool in more distant social relationships. The differences in how reporters use WhatsApp to share information with each other versus using it as an outreach tool reinforce the message that social proximity provides an important structure to the use of digital space; the virtual places created by WhatsApp messaging gain their reliability, safety, and usefulness from social relationships that exist outside of virtual space.

WhatsApp and Organizational Control

Finally, in these two newsrooms WhatsApp enabled “shop talk.” This was a further extension of physical newsroom space to the virtual, wherein reporters asked questions and editors discussed grammar and news angles. As a result, editorial discussion transcended synchronous and physical news meetings to provide constant influence over reporting routines and messages about organizational priorities.

At *KT Press*, reporters often wrote and posted material quickly to the Web, and editors would step in to correct or critique angles after publication than to direct the work in process, as happened with this discussion about coverage of a press conference on April 4:

Editor: Editors ... stop reporting at events or pressers from the usual narrow point ... you have this basic journalism style: PICK ANGLE AND REPORT THAT ...

Editor: The presser of Mushikiwabo had plenty of things said ... u only picked Pope and said alot of blaa blaaa blaaa ...

Editor: People would love to have idea of what else was said there ...

Editor: Thats why we sent people there ...

Editor: We have said this over and over ...but the same thing keeps happening ...

This critique highlights again the importance of physical presence at events, as the reporter is asked to basically serve as a stenographer, taking down everything that was said at a press conference and transporting it to a news article for publication.

Beyond this implication, the discussion also sends a signal to the entire newsroom group that a particular method of reporting (“pick angle and report that”) is not the right way to proceed with events and press conferences; rather, the *KT Press* newsroom demands broad stories that capture most or all of what transpires. Editors shared messages like this in editorial meetings as well as on WhatsApp. However, the virtual platform extended the newsroom into virtual space, thus allowing editors to insert their presence into any place where a reporter could access and read an update on his or her phone.

WhatsApp also allowed editors to reinforce messages about appropriate and inappropriate content and behaviour. In the WhatsApp group for *The New Times*, editors discussed Kinyarwanda and English grammar. When a few reporters complained, an editor explicitly claimed the WhatsApp group as a place to discuss copy errors and grammar: “This forum should be used to educate us all. Conventional mistakes are becoming entrenched in our everyday use of languages and are accepted. Hayo ni makosa. Pardon vraitment. Murakoze” (WhatsApp message, February 12, 2017). In response to an editor who shared information from an official source (the Rwandan Social Security Board, or RSSB) about a story in progress, a *KT Press* editor reacted with frustrated advice (April 25):

Editor: U are speaking to RSSB to tell u they changed a system that will not be liked by the public????!! Comeon guys ...

Editor: And u expect them to confirm that????!!

Editor: That approach is wrong and will not yield any results ... finally the story will be abandoned ...

Editor: What somebody should have done is start by confirming the story from users and hospitals ... then simply ask RSSB to comment on the development

In both of these cases, editors use information shared by a reporter to alert the entire newsroom about appropriate reporting routines and writing styles. These exchanges signal that editors value and reward certain kinds of behaviour, including grammatical accuracy, following a certain process in reporting, and reporting from certain angles. WhatsApp allows managers to convey this information to their staff in virtual space as well as physical space, reinforcing the message that editorial control extends beyond the newsroom to remote locations. These interactions suggest again that WhatsApp’s utility is moderated by social relationships via relational proximity and strength: Where the relationships are strong and clearly defined, as in the newsroom hierarchy of editors and reporters, the platform is a useful information-sharing tool. Where those relationships are weak or contested—as in the case of reporters and many of their sources—WhatsApp is less an extension of physical space, and instead becomes primarily a tool to help the reporter be physically present.

Conclusion

I set out to explore the infrastructure of reporting in Rwanda and the role of a new digital platform (WhatsApp) in that space. I found that, in the context of the country’s developing infrastructure and small news field, WhatsApp facilitates physical proximity

and extends managerial oversight of journalists' behaviour. Editors use newsroom WhatsApp groups to call for particular stories to be covered; to castigate reporter error; and to encourage constant production and distribution. Rwandan journalists prioritize physical presence even though the Rwandan environment presents many obstacles, including vehicle shortages, frequent downpours, and minimal transportation budgets.

This study suggests pragmatic applications. First, understanding the use of a new tool requires situating it in context. Actor-network theory helpfully extends the scope of research beyond one platform to the entire network of the phenomenon in question—in this case, the infrastructure of newsgathering. The network of actors involved in reporting the news in Rwanda includes editors, reporters, photographers, vehicles, drivers, rainy weather, motorcycles, taxi drivers, petty cash, event coordinators who run late, and WhatsApp. Editors, reporters, and photographers use WhatsApp to coordinate and manage the limitations imposed by physical constraints of transportation and weather, but the platform brings its own limitations. Democratic access means a cacophony of voices can share information and misinformation, sometimes in overlapping segments as seen in the *New Times* editorial discussion of the breaking news fire at Kimeronko prison. At other times, gaps in information sharing mean that one editor's plan for the day is superseded or imperfectly implemented, as can be seen in the *KT Press* assignment thread.

The findings also suggest two theoretical insights. First, physical presence matters for a variety of reasons. Existing literature suggests that it is primarily useful for what it signals to audiences. This study shows that it can also be useful because it facilitates information-gathering and signals a particular social relationship to sources. In Rwandan newsrooms, attending press conferences and other events is an important assignment that often takes priority. In spite of major obstacles contributed by vehicle access, weather, transportation budgets, and other constraints, reporters prioritize events. This event-focused news day is partly responsible for the common critique that Rwandan journalism lacks independence and investigation (Harber 2014). However, it is an effective signal to important sources—reporters get their quotes, news is produced, and the event invitations keep coming.

Second, the utility of WhatsApp and other virtual platforms is moderated by pre-existing social relationships. Where the relationships are strong and clearly defined, the platform can extend physical space into virtual. Where relationships are weak or unclear, the platform is less an extension of physical space and more a tool to coordinate physical presence. In these Rwandan newsrooms, WhatsApp allows editors to surveil their employees outside of the physical newsroom space, permitting them to remind employees constantly of important newsroom values, schedules, and other information. In the *New Times* and *KT Press* newsrooms, WhatsApp is often used for behaviour-oriented messages: reporters are directed to attend particular events, meet certain deadlines, and avoid stylistic errors and problematic angles. Since highly active management and lack of individual reporter control has been linked with low satisfaction and high exit rates in particular news organizations, it is possible that this use contributes to low job satisfaction (Reyna 2020). While beyond the scope of this article to explore, sources told me the Rwandan journalism field has high turnover rates, perhaps in part due to this management style.

This study is limited to direct observation of one shared WhatsApp group per news organization. Similar to the limitation Bunce, Wright, and Scott (2018) faced in their study of a newsroom's Slack channel, I could not observe one-on-one conversations between reporters with each other, with their editors, or with sources. To capture some of this missing information, I asked in interviews how reporters and editors used WhatsApp in other contexts; still, I primarily focuses on shared groups rather than other possible uses of WhatsApp. This study is also limited to two Rwandan newsrooms.

However, the findings extend beyond Rwanda to suggest new ways of theorizing digital journalism. As Star (1999) notes, "Study an information system and neglect its standards, wires, and settings, and you miss equally essential aspects of aesthetics, justice, and change" (379). Examining WhatsApp use in context reveals relational hierarchies in the Rwandan news infrastructure that guide newsgathering, reporting, and production. This study also highlights the fact that virtual communication platforms exist within both social and physical context. This study reinforces the limitations of digital tools in rectifying infrastructure gaps; I also show that the utility of WhatsApp and its ability to fill those gaps is moderated by social reality.

Notes

1. Not his real name.
2. About \$29 USD. Rwanda's GDP per capita in 2017 was \$762.91 USD; the equivalent U.S. taxi fare would be \$2,387.
3. This research was conducted as part of a project examining news production practices in Africa's Great Lakes region, East Africa, and Southern Africa. It was approved by the researcher's institutional IRB and the Rwandan Ministry of Education.
4. A new line usually, but not always, indicates a distinct message from a user; some messages included multiple line breaks. *KT Press* group members likely contributed fewer messages over this period because the group comprised only the editorial staff of about 15 people, while the *New Times* group comprised the full staff of the organization, including a larger editorial team, human resources staff, and others.
5. The *New Times* and *KT Press* were unusual in providing company cars and transportation reimbursements to reporters. Editors told me that other organizations would typically expect reporters on assignment to pay their own way to events—thus making it tempting to accept cash from sources to cover their "transportation budgets."
6. *The New Times* published an article about the fire online later that day. "Seven inmates injured as fire guts Gasabo prison," published the same day (March 31), uses photos shared to the WhatsApp group and includes the speculative report of gunshots sourced to "some residents living around the prison."

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