

Journalism training and media freedom in Rwanda

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Those who work to build the capacity of the media in Rwanda are soon confronted by a conundrum, a sort of journalistic chicken and egg syndrome. Is it possible, or even appropriate, for outside actors to contribute to building the capacity of the media sector in a post-conflict environment where press freedom still faces overwhelming challenges?

Does this kind of outside media intervention provide a fig leaf for a government that is evidently not yet ready to live with full-scale freedom of expression, or do foreign media trainers and journalism educators working on the ground serve to push the envelope and lay the foundations for a better media environment down the road? And, can outside media trainers operate effectively within such a fragile media environment, without compromising the very principles that they are trying to promote?

For nearly two years now, a media capacity-building project called the Rwanda Initiative (see www.RwandaInitiative.ca) has been grappling with these very questions. The initiative, launched in January 2006, is a partnership between the School of Journalism and Communication at the National University of Rwanda and its counterpart at Carleton University, in Ottawa. As a journalism professor at Carleton, I was one of those who helped to establish the Rwanda Initiative, which grew out of a symposium held at Carleton in early 2004 on the role of the media in the Rwanda genocide.¹

The Rwanda Initiative's first activity was a visiting lecturer program, with Carleton University raising the funds and recruiting veteran journalists and journalism educators from Canada to bolster the journalism faculty at the National University of Rwanda (NUR), in Butare. Carleton has also contributed to curriculum development efforts at the university and continues to work to build the journalism school's infrastructure. The project grew to include a media internship program that brought dozens of Canadian journalism students from Carleton to Rwanda for work terms with Rwandan media outlets.

Early in 2007, at the invitation of President Paul Kagame, the project began to supply in-house media trainers to a number of Kigali-based media outlets, both government-controlled and privately owned. In its first two years of operations, the Rwanda Initiative brought more than 60 Canadians to Rwanda in an effort to raise media standards against the backdrop of a country that has had precious little opportunity to experience the kind of unbridled press freedom taken for

granted in rich, industrialized societies like Canada.

In the years after independence, Rwanda's constricted media scene was almost entirely government-controlled. During a brief period in the early 1990s, the liberalization that opened the way for a multi-party system also spawned a proliferation of new media outlets. Among those new media organs were such notorious hate media vehicles as radio station RTLM and the newspaper Kangura, tools of the extremist Hutu power movement.

The volatile period of the early 1990s gave way to the cataclysm of 1994, when the world stood by while the Rwanda genocide claimed the lives of an estimated 800,000 people in the space of 100 days. News media played a key role in the genocide, with RTLM broadcasts fanning the flames.² The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in 2003 rendered a landmark guilty verdict in the so-called 'media trial' of three media executives – two from RTLM and one from Kangura – charged with genocide and crimes against humanity.

The news media were both implicated in and devastated by the genocide. Forty-nine media professionals were murdered and others jailed after the fact, accused of inciting or participating in the killing. Rwanda's media sector has been striving to emerge from the trauma ever since. Because of the devastation wrought by the genocide, newsrooms in Rwanda are populated for the most part by young journalists with little or no professional training.

Despite considerable growth in the private media sector since 1994, the Kagame government is frequently accused by human rights organizations and press freedom monitors of creating a media climate characterized by self-censorship among many journalists and intimidation of journalists by government proxies.³ Many journalists critical of the government have left the country, notable among them, Thomas Kamilindi, a former Radio Rwanda broadcaster.

'When the RPF came to power, myself I was really hopeful that things would change. But I am deceived,' Kamilindi said in early 2007 after seeking asylum in the United States.⁴ 'Many, many journalists are facing troubles because they dare to report on topics which are taboo, the army, corruption, the person of the President himself,' said Kamilindi, who noted that he was among those to receive death threats and visits at his home from security officials before fleeing Rwanda.

Need for journalism training

The government and its supporters contend that outsiders don't understand the complex media

dynamic in post-genocide Rwanda, which is still shadowed by the media legacy from 1994 and the threat of a Hutu extremist resurgence. 'The government of Rwanda is committed to freedom of expression and freedom of the press,' Information Minister Laurent Nkusi wrote in mid-2007. 'For this to happen, however, our journalists need to be trained and empowered... without professional ethics on the part of the journalists, freedom of expression will be a hollow concept and our journalists will not be able to practice their trade as they should.'⁵

President Kagame himself frequently criticizes the media for lack of professionalism, sparring with reporters at press conferences and scolding them in other public fora. One of Kagame's key advisors, Emmanuel Ndahiro, makes no secret of his disdain for Rwanda's journalists. 'We have no journalists in Rwanda, only young men who dropped out of school,' said Ndahiro,⁶ who coincidentally sits on the board of directors of the New Times, the privately-owned English-language daily that makes a point of towing the government line.

Prior to the genocide, there was no school of journalism in Rwanda and no tradition of formal journalism education or systematic training. Rwanda's journalists were either trained outside the country or more likely, trained 'on the job' with a few seminars and workshops to improve their skills. The first journalism program at the National University was founded in 1996 but its original curriculum was very theoretical and focused on the role of the media – not the formation of journalists. Little practical training was provided.

In 2000, the school changed its name to the School of Journalism and Communication and revised its curriculum, with the assistance of an American journalism educator, Steve Pasternack, then head of New Mexico State University's journalism and mass communications department. Pasternack made numerous trips to Rwanda and at one point, funded by a Fulbright grant, spent his sabbatical helping to design the new curriculum and launch a community radio station in Butare, Radio Salus. Tragically, Pasternack died suddenly in 2003 after returning from a trip to Rwanda.

The curriculum Pasternack left behind emphasized more practical aspects of training future journalists. But the school still had major problems attracting and retaining teachers. Visiting lecturers arrived occasionally, supported by various foundations and fellowships, but not on a consistent basis. In early 2004, two professors from the Butare journalism school – Jean-Pierre Gatsinzi and Ines Mpambara, took part in the one-day symposium I organized at Carleton, examining the role of the media in the Rwanda genocide.⁷

Gatsinzi was then the director of the journalism school and Mpambara the former director. The symposium resulted in the publication of an edited collection of papers, *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*.⁸ It also gave birth to the Rwanda Initiative project, in large measure because of Gatsinzi's persistent requests for assistance from Carleton.

The first Rwanda Initiative teachers arrived in Butare in January, 2006. Their role was both to teach journalism at the university and to communicate with Canadians and a wider audience on the World Wide Web about the experience. Indeed, all of the Canadian participants in the Rwanda Initiative – teachers, trainers and interns – have been required to maintain web log journals, known as ‘blogs’, which are posted on the Rwanda Initiative website – www.RwandaInitiative.ca. The blogs are designed to share the experiences of working in the media in Rwanda. In addition, a number of the Canadian project participants have done other journalistic work from Rwanda for publication or broadcast in Canada.

Lessons learned

There have already been a number of lessons learned from the visiting lecturer program, the student internship and the fledgling media training program with working journalists. The Canadian instructors who have had the opportunity to teach in Butare have been almost uniformly impressed by the calibre of the students and dismayed by the challenges faced by the university and its small teaching staff. In their evaluations of Rwanda Initiative instructors, Rwandan journalism students have consistently raved about a teaching style that emphasizes practical, hands-on experience through field trips, real-world reporting assignments and open discussions about the role of the media.

The teaching style is no accident; it is adapted from the hands-on approach to journalism education that has been a hallmark of Carleton’s journalism program for decades. The challenge remains to build the capacity of the National University of Rwanda to revise its journalism curriculum and teach it more effectively without relying so heavily upon outside assistance.

When dealing with a media capacity-building project, the results are at best incremental and hard to discern. But there have already been some preliminary indications of the success of the Rwanda Initiative project. Most important for the long term has been the project’s role at the university, working with the next generation of Rwandan journalists, those who hopefully will get an opportunity to function in a more open media environment in Rwanda.

From the beginning, my philosophy has been that if only a handful of our students emerged as better journalists, that would be a significant contribution to the media environment in Rwanda. Rwanda Initiative teachers have now been in contact with almost every student passing through the journalism program at NUR. The quality of their journalism education has been enriched. The project is also involved in a curriculum review process that will hopefully have a lasting impact on the way young journalists are trained in Rwanda and bring about sustainable change to the journalism teaching environment in Rwanda.

A number of NUR journalism students have been able to publish or broadcast some of their journalistic work in Canada, with the assistance of Rwanda Initiative teachers. One interesting example of the impact of the project is journalism student Eugene Kwibuka, who was completing the NUR journalism program in late 2007. Kwibuka has now had half a dozen or more visiting Canadians as teachers at NUR. He also visited Canada through an internship set up by Sue Montgomery, a reporter at the Montreal Gazette who has been to Butare twice as a Rwanda Initiative visiting lecturer.

While in Montreal, Kwibuka covered the Desire Munyaneza genocide trial for Radio Salus and the New Times. Without question, Kwibuka has become a promising young journalist in part because of the instruction he received from visiting Rwanda Initiative teachers.

Looking to the future

The rationale of the visiting lecturer program is simple: even if the media environment in Rwanda is sorely lacking, it is still a worthwhile venture to instil in the next generation of journalists the skill set and the attitudes that will serve them well down the road.

Rwanda Initiative interns, all of them students or recent graduates of Carleton's journalism school at both the undergraduate and graduate level have provided the Rwanda Initiative with a window into the working environment in Rwandan newsrooms. In their blog entries and final reports, interns have taken note of some of the challenges faced by their Rwandan colleagues, not least the low pay and lack of resources.

Carleton interns witnessed Rwandan colleagues struggling with basic reporting and news writing skills, taking bribes or concocting quotes from people who did not even attend the events being reported upon. By the same token, interns encountered many journalists of good conscience, who wanted to do the best that they could.

The media training program that brought working journalists to Rwanda in early 2007 was a response to frequent requests by Rwandan officials for the Rwanda Initiative to augment its work at the university by providing Canadian experts to assist working journalists, many of whom had no formal training.

The Rwanda Initiative offered trainers to TV Rwanda, the New Times and Newline. The experience of these trainers has been telling and also presented the greatest challenges for the

project, which found itself for the first time in conflict with government authorities.

The mandate of the Rwanda Initiative is to try and build the capacity of the media in Rwanda in the hope that, along the way, the government's capacity to interact with the news media in a more open environment will grow as well. The balancing act for visitors is deciding how far to push the boundaries, when it is appropriate to bide our time and when it is best to speak out.

Without question, we can build capacity by working together with the National University to improve the learning environment for students, the next generation of journalists. We can build capacity indirectly through the contribution made by Canadian student interns who work in Rwanda and forge lasting networks with their Rwandan colleagues. And we can also contribute by helping to raise professional standards among working journalists, to take away the oft-repeated and convenient government claim that journalists can't be trusted to report accurately. If the public believes that journalists are untrustworthy, it will be easier for people in positions of power to mistreat them.

But in the process, there has been friction. Several of the journalists who participated in the project as teachers or media trainers chose to use their blog postings to directly and bluntly criticize the Kagame government's record on press freedom. It is hardly surprising that Canadian journalists used to operating in an environment of virtually unrestrained press freedom should take note of the restrictions in place in Rwanda. By the same token, it is hardly surprising that officials in the Kagame government reacted negatively to criticism from foreign journalists who had spent just a few weeks in the country.

The Rwandan government took particular exception to blog postings and columns published by Claude Adams, a veteran reporter with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Global TV and objected to blog postings in the Ottawa Citizen by Gary Dimmock, an investigative reporter who worked as a Rwanda Initiative media trainer with the independent newspaper Newsline.⁹ The government also formally protested against an op-ed piece published by former Toronto Star publisher John Honderich, who had been at the New Times as a visiting editor.¹⁰

Honderich wrote about the firing of former New Times Sunday Editor, Gaaki Kigambo, after the newspaper published a picture of Kagame that the president's office found unflattering. Toronto Star reporter Debra Black, who was also placed at the New Times as a media trainer, recounted Kigambo's firing in an Aug. 1, 2007 blog posting on the Rwanda Initiative website:

'While I was doing media training at the New Times an editor was sacked because he had approved publication of a picture of President Kagame that was deemed to be unflattering. The rest of the staff was told in no uncertain terms that this was not to be done again. They were also

told to avoid criticizing the government, the presidency and the law. They only needed to be told once for the message to sink in.’

Ironically, some of the harshest criticism of the Rwanda Initiative has come from within, from former participants in the project. Claude Adams, the former CBC and Global reporter who also taught journalism at the University of British Columbia, joined the Rwanda Initiative to do a training stint with TV Rwanda in April 2007. But before Adams could get in the door at the television station, the director of TV Rwanda, Kije Mugisha, took exception to one of Adams’ blogs.

As it turns out, the matter was the subject of discussion among the board of directors of Orinfor, the government’s media office. In the end, Adams was barred from taking up his training post at TV Rwanda. Instead, he taught a television reporting course for the Rwanda Initiative at NUR. After his return to Canada, Adams wrote of his doubts about the merits of the Rwanda Initiative project.

In a column published online, Adams said the pro-government New Times newspaper and Rwandan TV operate as ‘a bulletin board for Kagame’s political and social agenda.’¹¹ He also asked aloud why the Rwanda Initiative didn’t withdraw from any contact with the New Times after the firing of Kigambo:

‘The incident raises questions for all Canadians involved in development programs in the Third World: To what degree should the fear of offending a host government prompt volunteers to soft-pedal professional and ethical standards in the course of their work? When is it okay to bite your tongue for the “good of the project”, and when do you stand on principle, even at the risk of being shut down?’

Adams’ view is that projects like the Rwanda Initiative should insist that the government guarantee certain fundamental principles in the practice of journalism before agreeing to take part in a development program.

As a career journalist, I have tremendous respect for the critique levelled by Claude Adams at the Rwanda Initiative, the project that I was instrumental in establishing. But my retort – framed as a question – is the following: How best could the Rwanda Initiative contribute to building the capacity of the media in Rwanda, by boycotting the country, or by choosing to forge ahead, despite the tenuous media environment?

To me, the answer is self-evident. We can not make a difference if we are not present on the ground, working to instil new journalistic standards among the next generation of journalists and making whatever impression we can upon the working journalists who populate Rwanda's newsrooms. Media development in a post-conflict environment like Rwanda is almost certain to be complicated and difficult. The easy route would be to shout in protest and then leave the country.

By definition, there is no answer to chicken and egg riddles. The puzzle cannot be resolved. In my view, the best course of action for the Rwanda Initiative is to put the puzzle aside and get on with the business of working with Rwanda's journalists in the hope that we can make a difference.

Notes

1. I worked for 17 years as a reporter with the Toronto Star newspaper, Canada's largest circulation daily and in that capacity, visited Rwanda several times. In 2003, I took up a teaching position with Carleton University's School of Journalism and Communication and from that vantage point, launched the Rwanda Initiative.

2. Please see Part Three: The Media Trial, Journalism as Genocide, pp. 277-372 in *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, Allan Thompson (editor), Pluto Press (London), Fountain Publishers (Kampala), International Development Research Centre (Ottawa). January, 2007.

3. See reports by Human Rights Watch (<http://hrw.org/englishwr2k7/docs/2007/01/11/rwanda14782.htm>), Amnesty International (<http://thereport.amnesty.org/eng/Regions/Africa/Rwanda>) and Reporters without Borders (http://www.rsf.org/country-36.php3?id_mot=203) as well as 'Censorship and Propaganda in Post-Genocide Rwanda,' a chapter by Lars Waldorf in *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, pp.404-416.

4. From remarks by Thomas Kamilindi at a book launch event for *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, held at the World Bank Infoshop bookstore, Feb. 1, 2007. An account of the panel discussion in which Mr. Kamilindi participated can be found at <http://www.allanthompson.ca/blog.html#feb1>

5. Letter from Mr. Laurent Nkusi to Allan Thompson, director of the Rwanda Initiative, Sept. 7, 2007.

6. Conversation with the author, January 2007.

7. The proceedings of the Media and the Rwanda Genocide symposium held at Carleton on March 13, 2004 can be found on the website of the Rwanda Initiative at the following link: <http://www.rwandainitiative.ca/symposium/index.html>