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# Journalists' Perceptions of Human Rights Reporting in Rwanda

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## ABSTRACT

News media play a role in increasing public understanding of human rights issues. Yet, little scholarship has analysed human rights reporting in developing or post-conflict nations. Interviews with Rwandan journalists revealed that, in this post-genocide era of reconstruction, reporters define human rights broadly and believe reporting on abuses has a positive impact on the abuse. However, a lack of press freedom inhibits human rights reporting, thus prohibiting journalists from fulfilling their social responsibility.

**Keywords:** Rwanda; press freedom; human rights; journalism; interviews; news

## Introduction

The “if it bleeds, it leads” trope, which suggests editors prioritise attention-grabbing news stories with conflict and tragedy in order to profit from them, has long been a staple of media criticism, but social responsibility theorists argue that news media play a far more important role than seeking ratings. According to the social responsibility theory of the press, publishers operate their media “with some concern for the public good” (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956, 77). As such, news media play a role in increasing public understanding of an array of social problems and human rights-related issues (Robinson 2002). While media scholars have begun to turn their attention to human rights reporting (see, for example, Bogert 2011; Brooten 2015; el-Nawawy and Khamis 2014; Winston 2017), it remains unclear exactly how human rights journalism

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functions, what challenges journalists face when reporting on such issues and whether those stories have any impact on the human rights abuses being covered.

Human rights abuses happen in every country on earth, but can be amplified in conflict and post-conflict zones (UNHCHR 2011). The East African nation of Rwanda experienced a genocide in 1994, which killed 800,000 Rwandans in a conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups (Taylor 1999). Scholars have suggested that Rwandan media are (at least partially) to blame for the genocide by “inciting the hatred that led to violence by using an ethnic framework to report what was essentially a political struggle” (Kellow and Steeves 1998, 107). Others have furthered that argument, explaining that the Rwandan government and military used national radio to perpetuate a “kill-or-be-killed” narrative that escalated the violence (Kasoma 1995; Kellow and Steeves 1998; Mamdani 1996; Paris 2004). While Rwanda still faces challenges relating to poverty and government corruption, the nation has seen remarkable changes in the 23 years of reconstruction since the genocide. The country has a higher percentage of women in parliament than any other nation (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016), approximately 97 per cent of children enrolled in primary school (UNICEF 2012) and economic growth that averages eight per cent each year since 2001 (Howard 2014). Despite this rapidly changing political and economic landscape, Rwanda is still a developing country that is overcoming a not-too-distant conflict, and human rights abuses remain prevalent (Human Rights Watch 2016). However, the nation is experiencing rapid social, political and economic changes which are bringing some human rights abuses to light. As a result, present-day Rwanda presents a unique opportunity to investigate how journalists in Rwanda in the current, post-genocide era understand human rights reporting.

## Literature Review

### Human Rights

Despite the prominence of the term “human rights,” it can be difficult to define exactly what such an idea looks like in practice. Human rights are “generally moral rights claimed by everyone and held against everyone, especially against those who run social institutions” (Orend 2002, 37). For example, “everyone has the right to life” (UN General Assembly 1948, Art. 3), “no one shall be held in slavery or servitude” (UN General Assembly 1948, Art. 4), and “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression” (UN General Assembly 1948, Art. 19). With the creation of the United Nations and the subsequent adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the concept of human rights was formalised and has since become a prominent topic of discussion around the world. The Charter of the United Nations, which was adopted in 1945, was the first international document to recognise the protection and promotion of human rights as an obligation to be carried out by individuals as well as collective states (Langley 1999). It has been argued that the United Nations Charter was

primarily adopted to prevent the recurrence of the catastrophic events caused by two world wars, which were the result of gross violations of human rights (Smith 2007).

In addition to states, corporations and non-governmental organisations also play important roles in promoting human rights (Addo 1999). However, despite the array of human rights instruments and protectors, countless human rights violations are still perpetrated across the globe by state and non-state actors (Arat 2006). It is often the state that is the very abuser of the human rights it is obligated to protect (Clapham and Rubio 2002). Despite, or possibly because of, who the abuser is, the concept of human rights is now widely recognised in several parts of the world. The idea has become part of the global conversation, and as a result human rights violations are becoming more commonly reported on by journalists (Nickel 2007).

## Links between Human Rights and the Media

Literature has long confirmed the power of the media to influence what topics audiences think about (see, for example, McCombs and Shaw 1972). However, critics have argued that news media prefer the “flashy audience-grabbing and ratings-soaring image or story” (Lustgarten and Debix 2005, 364), and thus lack the interest or resources needed to cover topics like human rights.

After all, writing about human rights issues can be difficult and resource-intensive. Depending on the issue, journalists can face immense ethical and safety challenges when trying to report on human rights abuses, specifically those in conflict situations (Schimmel 2009). Heinze and Freedman (2010) note that “pressure to attract reader interest, and to respond to the most topical and controversial issues overpower any priority that might be placed on comprehensive human rights coverage” (493). The International Council on Human Rights Policy (2002) suggested that human rights organisations provide grants to journalists working on human rights stories in order to better enable journalists through resources to dedicate to the story. Future research could determine if that is happening, and if so, whether it is effective in increasing the quantity and/or quality of human rights coverage.

However, according to the tenets of the social responsibility theory of the press (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956) and activists such as Mary Robinson (2002), the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, media have an important role to play in increasing public knowledge of human rights abuses and encouraging policy changes. As a result, human rights organisations reach out to news media in different capacities in attempts to utilise the media as a tool to stop human rights violations via publicly shaming human rights violators, educating policymakers and the public, or attempting to attract international resources.

For example, Amnesty International (2013) conducts media outreach to encourage news media to report on the human rights issues that the organisation works on. Similarly,

Human Rights Watch (HRW), a well-known transnational human rights organisation, works with the media to publicly shame human rights violators. HRW maintains close relationships with foreign correspondents and provides information to journalists with the hope that they will broadcast the information to a wide audience (Bogert 2011).

Additionally, changes in media systems in recent years have resulted in a decline in foreign correspondents, and as a result, human rights organisations have begun to generate human rights-focused news stories on their own (Bogert 2011). For example, HRW hires professional photographers, videographers, and radio producers to travel and work with its researchers to create multimedia content for distribution on the HRW social media sites, and Amnesty International has created a “news unit” where it employs five professional journalists to write human rights stories (Bogert 2011).

It is worth noting, also, that criticism certainly exists surrounding human rights reporting and the role of journalists in such investigations, particularly in conflict zones. Brooten (2015) found a “savior-as-white-foreigner frame to include not only politicians, aid workers and relief officials, but also journalists” in coverage of stateless Rohingya Muslims in a humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, as journalists portrayed themselves as “saviors of truth” (142).

## The Influence of Media Coverage on the Human Rights Agenda

Despite potential criticism, Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956) suggested that the media need to keep society’s interest as a priority. However, it is unclear what this role is for journalists in the context of human rights abuses. It could be argued that because the media can set the public agenda by reporting one news story and skipping others, then, the media can take up the human rights agenda by publishing or broadcasting human rights-focused stories. Specifically, forestalling human rights violations and uncovering the abuses may largely be possible through investigative journalism. It is the role of investigative journalists to search for and uncover the truth, which, when done effectively, can bring about change (de Burgh 2000). Apodaca (2007) explains that news media “can disseminate human rights information, mobilize human rights NGOs, strengthen popular participation in civil society, promote tolerance, and shine a light on government activity” (151). Additionally, news media foster the concept of “collective rights” when minority social groups are given the chance to partake in public discussion (Erni 2009).

As such, many human rights organisations regularly seek media coverage of their work. However, even when the human rights organisation or its work is reported in the mainstream news media, one could question whether it actually has any impact on the human rights violation.

Research has exhibited the impact of news discourse on policymakers because the media steer attention toward certain policy domains while ignoring or downplaying

other aspects or issues. For example, a study of U.S. policymaking decisions regarding African nations revealed that most members of Congress had little knowledge of or direct experience with Africa, and therefore relied heavily on news media for information upon which they based policy decisions (Wiley 1991). Similar notions could apply to policymaking decisions regarding human rights violations, though research would need to confirm that.

While research on the role of news media in combating human rights abuses remains in its infancy, scholars have begun to turn their attention to the impact of news coverage on human rights and humanitarian issues. Manzella and Yacher (2010) state that the press was proven to be “a force for change” in Venezuela, when a group of journalists uncovered the hidden scandals of President Carlos Andres Pérez, which eventually led to his ouster (71). Additionally, journalists reporting on human rights abuses at a newspaper in Mexico explained that they believed they were acting as a form of “counter-power” to the state and that by covering human rights abuses occurring in the local community, the coverage “can awaken a moral outrage in the public” and cause audience members to be grateful they are not in that position, and in turn, to want to do something to help (McPherson 2012, 108). These same journalists report being hopeful that by reading about such human rights abuses, constituents will put pressure on their elected officials, which would result in governmental action and thus achieve what Protes, Cook and Doppelt (1991) would describe as the classic policy agenda-building aim of this type of journalism (McPherson 2012). Additionally, journalists described being hopeful that their coverage would not only mobilise citizens and government officials, but that it would also have an important educational aspect for citizens in that readers would learn that they have an array of rights (McPherson 2012).

Alternatively, a lack of coverage of an issue can perpetuate the human rights violation. In a discussion of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, Thompson (2007) argues that due to the absence of local and foreign journalists and the failure to adequately observe and record the events that took place, “journalists contributed to the behavior of the perpetrators of the genocide—who were encouraged by the world’s apathy and acted with impunity” (5). However, a lack of empirical evidence exists to support the impacts of such human rights reporting, so it could be argued that these hopes of human rights journalists are overly idealistic, or at least, unproven.

## Human Rights and the Media in Rwanda

As previously mentioned, human rights abuses can be especially prevalent in times and regions of conflict and post-conflict (UNHCHR 2011), such as the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. The genocide lasted for 100 days in Rwanda, from April through July 1994. Hutu residents murdered their Tutsi neighbours with machetes and household items that could be used as weapons. The genocide came to an end when the Rwandan Patriotic Front, led by Rwanda’s current president, Paul Kagame, defeated

the government-backed militias that led the killings. Ultimately, an estimated 800,000 individuals were murdered and an additional two million fled and became refugees in neighbouring countries (Taylor 1999).

State-run media houses exacerbated the genocide using so-called “hate media” (Kellow and Steeves 1998). The most infamous media outlet was Radio-Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTL), run by Hutu Power party officials, whose reporters used cultural and religious symbols to successfully perpetuate messages of hate (Kellow and Steeves 1998). News media explicitly called for the Tutsis to be killed and intentionally exposed their hiding places. At the time, trust in the media was high—in fact, some individuals viewed the voice on the radio as the voice of God (Journalist 16, personal communication, 2016). It has been argued that the media campaign was so influential that the genocide would not have happened without it (Kellow and Steeves 1998).

While the nation is no longer engaged in civil war, widespread human rights abuses have been identified in present-day Rwanda, including unlawful detentions and a lack of free expression, and few civil society organisations document and expose these violations (Human Rights Watch 2016). However, despite the prevalence of human rights abuses, in addition to the social and economic advances made since the genocide, the media landscape has also developed. Many local journalists now receive formal training at the National University of Rwanda’s School of Journalism and Communication, which was launched in 1995 with support from UNESCO (Kayumba and Kimonyo 2006). And the number of media houses grew after the genocide, thanks to help from international donors. In fact, this was the first time news outlets became popularised in the country (Kamilindi 2007), which previously lacked a comprehensive press culture. Rwanda only saw its first newspaper in 1933, and it was published by the Catholic Church. By 2015, however, the country had 38 radio stations, 11 TV stations, 53 newspapers, and 23 news websites (Bonde et al. 2015). These include a mix of both commercial outlets and those owned by the government.

Currently Rwanda’s government guarantees a free press (Republic of Rwanda 2003, Art. 34). However, many commercial news outlets depend on the government to buy advertisements, and journalists claim that government entities buy advertisements from outlets that publish stories supportive of the government and withhold advertising money from news organisations that criticise the government (Bonde et al. 2015). The government also places restrictions on journalists by making it illegal to promote genocide ideology or incite ethnic divisionism, which is broadly defined as “a crime committed by any oral or written expression or any act of division that could generate conflicts among the population or cause disputes” (Republic of Rwanda 2001, Art. 3). This complicates press freedom in the country and helps explain why Freedom House (2016) classified Rwanda as “Not Free” and Reporters Without Borders (2016) ranked the country 161st on the World Press Freedom Index, explaining, “[c]ensorship is ubiquitous in Rwanda, where the spectre of genocide is used to justify the extensive

constraints that the government places on the media. Those who dare to criticize the government risk imprisonment or exile” (para. 1).

Human Rights Watch (2016) suggested that “[p]ro-government views dominated domestic media, but several private radio stations broadcast programs on human rights and other politically sensitive issues” (para. 7). However, no known empirical studies have specifically examined human rights reporting in Rwanda, specifically from the perspective of journalists. To begin to fill that gap in scholarship, this study poses the following exploratory research questions:

RQ1: What topics do Rwandan journalists consider to be “human rights” stories?

RQ2: Who do Rwandan journalists believe are the audiences for their human rights-focused stories?

RQ3: What responses have Rwandan journalists received to their human rights stories?

RQ4: How do Rwandan journalists believe human rights reporting impacts the prevalence of the human rights abuse(s) being carried out?

RQ5: What challenges do Rwandan journalists face when trying to write about human rights-related topics?

## Method

This study utilised qualitative interviews with current and former Rwandan journalists and editors to understand the functions and challenges of reporting on human rights violations in post-genocide Rwanda. For the purposes of this study, a journalist was defined as someone who earns the majority of their income from being a journalist. Individuals who regularly blog but do not also publish stories in recognised newspapers were excluded.

Initially, journalists were identified by conducting a search in each Rwandan newspaper’s website for journalist contact information. A later search of Twitter and Facebook pages relating to Rwandan journalists was used to contact more reporters and editors. After initial journalists were contacted, a snowball sample was used in which the initial journalists were asked to suggest other journalists who might be interested in being interviewed for the study. A snowball sample was intentionally used in order to include the perspectives of journalists from media organisations with an array of editorial lines. See Table 1 for the job title, affiliation and employer type of each interviewee.

**Table 1:** Interviewee, job title, employer, and employer type. Employer type determined by Bonde et al. (2015) and through interviews.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Job title</b>	<b>Employer</b>	<b>Employer type</b>
Journalist 1	Former radio/TV presenter	Voice of Africa	Religious
Journalist 2	Editor	Radio/TV 10	Commercial
Journalist 3	Online news editor	Izuba Rirashe	Government-run
Journalist 4	Senior producer	Radio/TV 10	Commercial
Journalist 5	Former journalist	Withheld	Government-run
Journalist 6	Editor/Reporter/Presenter	Radio Isango Star	Commercial
Journalist 7	Reporter	Withheld	Commercial
Journalist 8	Reporter	New Times	Government-run
Journalist 9	Editor	Umusingi	Commercial
Journalist 10	Cofounder	Umuseke.rw	Commercial
Journalist 11	Journalist	Royal FM	Commercial
Journalist 12	Reporter	The New Times	Government-run
Journalist 13	Editor	Gusenga.org	Religious
Journalist 14	Senior reporter	Izuba Rirashe	Government-run
Journalist 15	Reporter	City Radio	Commercial
Journalist 16	Freelancer	The New Times	Government-run
Journalist 17	News editor	The East African	Commercial
Journalist 18	Reporter	Associated Press	Commercial
Journalist 19	Former journalist	Withheld	Government-run
Journalist 20	Director	Radio Salus	Student-run
Journalist 21	Reporter	Radio Salus	Student-run
Journalist 22	Reporter	Kigali Today/KT Radio	Commercial
Journalist 23	Owner	Great Lakes Voice	Commercial
Journalist 24	Editor	Kigali Today	Commercial

Twenty-four interviews were conducted. Most interviews took place at the office of the interviewee or a nearby coffee shop, but the locations of the interviews were determined by the interviewees. One interview was conducted over the phone and the remaining 23 interviews took place in Kigali and Butare, Rwanda. All interviews were conducted in English and began with a summary of the study and an informed consent protocol.

All interviews were audio recorded with permission from the interviewees and full transcriptions were created from the recordings.

The interviews were semi-structured (Creswell 2003) and consisted of open-ended questions as well as basic demographic questions. Journalists were asked to reflect on their own stories, their perceptions about human rights stories and audience responses, and the challenges they faced when investigating, writing and publishing such articles. The names of interviewees are withheld to prevent any possible repercussions for speaking openly about the genocide or their relationship with the government.

Verbatim transcriptions were created from the audio recordings, which generated 194 pages of transcripts. The shortest interview was 12 minutes and the longest was one hour and 49 minutes, with the average interview lasting 45.5 minutes. Each transcript and its accompanying field notes were read multiple times to pull out central themes, ideas or words to make meaning of the diverse viewpoints.

After the categories were created, interview transcripts were imported into Dedoose, a collaborative, cross-platform application for the management, integration, and analysis of qualitative data (Lieber and Weisner 2013) to further analyse how the data were used. Analysing the data by real people as well as computer software allows the content to be classified by themes and words used as well as to account for body language, tone and interpersonal subtleties.

## Findings and Discussion

Analysis in Dedoose of the transcripts yielded 98 applications of three codes and five subcodes that were used in this study, although information from additional codes were used in other papers resulting from this dataset. After analysing the transcripts and the frequency of each code, five thematic categories emerged. The first theme focuses on the array of stories considered by Rwandan journalists to fall under the umbrella of “human rights.” The second theme describes the vast audience that Rwandan journalists believe human rights stories have. The third theme relates to positive responses that journalists receive to their stories as a result of a unique concern for human rights in African nations. The fourth theme describes how journalists believe their human rights-focused stories are having a positive impact on the abuse itself. Lastly, the final theme discusses the challenges associated with trying to report on human rights violations in the post-genocide era.

### Topics That Are Considered “Human Rights”

As previously mentioned, the phrase “human rights” can be difficult to define and often definitions vary substantially from one person to the next. As such, when Rwandan journalists were asked what topics they would consider to be human rights-focused stories, an array of answers were given. Answers ranged from “fighting malaria”

(Journalist 5, personal communication, May 28, 2016), to “women’s rights” (Journalist 20, personal communication, June 2, 2016), to individuals who “don’t have electricity, they don’t have water” (Journalist 10, personal communication, May 30, 2016) and when “entrepreneurs refuse to pay their employees” (Journalist 15, personal communication, May 31, 2016). Others suggested topics such as “the conditions of prisoners and prisons” (Journalist 6, personal communication, May 29, 2016), “freedom of speech, freedom to express yourself, freedom to access ... health care ... climate change” (Journalist 17, personal communication, June 1, 2016) and “how [Rwandans] can live, how they can treat their children” (Journalist 6, personal communication, May 29, 2016).

Journalists who provided specific examples of human rights stories they had written tended to focus, unsurprisingly, on topics relating to the genocide. Journalist 5, a former journalist, gave the example of a young woman whose parents were killed in the genocide. He said she had been trying to regain the property that her parents owned before they were killed. He explained that these types of post-genocide reconciliation cases had “been handled by different [government] officers, but they never come to a conclusion,” thus violating people’s human rights (personal communication, May 28, 2016). Similarly, Journalist 7, who requested his organisation be withheld, explained, “[w]e have three ethnic groups in Rwanda. There’s the Hutu and the Tutsi and then there is the Twa, the very small population and they’ve always been impoverished in the country. I wrote a piece just a few, two weeks back, about government not taking good care of [the Twa people]” (personal communication, May 29, 2016).

Others spoke more broadly about human rights journalism in post-genocide Rwanda being focused on maintaining peace. For example, Journalist 9 (personal communication, May 29, 2016), editor of the newspaper *Umusingi*, explained:

You have to write a story that teaches people not to kill, not to fight, that is not the solution ... [T]here are many violences [sic], but you have to write a story teaching them about their rights, how they should handle the problems.

And Journalist 8, a reporter at the country’s largest government-run newspaper, *The New Times*, provided the example of a human rights story being written when “we find that some areas in the country have championed in unity where other are still dragging feet” (personal communication, May 29, 2016).

While there was variation in the specific topics that journalists wrote about or conceptualised as a human rights-focused story, all of them focused on issues of social justice and inequality. Other journalists described their human rights stories more broadly and in line with notions of equity and fairness. Journalist 3, an online editor at *Izuba Rarishe*, the Kinyarwanda version of the country’s largest state-run newspaper, said “[i]f you know there is a community that is underprivileged, that is facing problems with human rights, you write about that” (personal communication, May 27, 2016), and Journalist 16, a freelancer at *The New Times*, said human rights-focused news stories

“are written in such a way that they favour the people and I think that is the most important thing if you’re really in favour of the human being in whatever you do” (personal communication, May 31, 2016).

## Audience for Human Rights Stories

Possibly as a result of the wide array of stories that Rwandan journalists believe fall under the umbrella of “human rights” and the newsworthiness of the stories, reporters described vast audience interest in the stories. When asked who the audience was for such stories, Journalist 2, from Radio 10, replied “[a] lot of people” (personal communication, May 27, 2016). Journalist 12 (personal communication, May 30, 2016), a reporter at *The New Times*, elaborated by saying the following:

Some primary audiences are important organisations fighting for human rights, even the citizens and police and lawmakers in the government. Because when we report such stories, these people are getting information about how people outside there, how people in villages are violated, so I think these people are key audiences for our stories we publish about human rights.

Journalist 17, news editor at *The East African*, which is regarded as the most truly independent news outlet in the country because it does not rely on the government to buy advertisements, explained that she believed the public cares about human rights and reads the stories “because human rights affect your day-to-day life, so it’s something they’re interested in” (personal communication, June 1, 2016). Journalist 7 elaborated on that notion and said, “I think there is a big variety of people, especially the elites, who follow the [human rights] stories. When it comes to the people who are uneducated, especially in the villages, they definitely read [the stories]” (personal communication, May 29, 2016).

This is a notable departure from criticism in Western nations that audiences care more about entertainment news than they do about human rights or social justice-focused stories (Thussu 2008). Journalist 2 from Radio 10 explained that it might be the result of the genocide and the current era of reconciliation. “We’re rebuilding so people need to come close to each other and discuss health, unity and reconciliation matters and policy. Reporting about human rights, it’s helping people know how they shape the policies, how they can overcome difficult matters” (personal communication, May 27, 2016).

## Response to Articles from the Public

In a similar vein to discussions about audience interest in human rights stories, journalists commonly spoke about positive reactions from readers of their articles. Journalist 2, from Radio 10, explained that the human rights articles “have been received really positively” (personal communication, May 27, 2016). Journalist 14, a journalist at the government-run newspaper *Izuba Rarishe*, said stories about human rights violations “are the stories that are most liked on our website.” He then gave an example by saying,

“I remember recently a colleague wrote about a street vendor that was killed ... in the market near town, and that story was like the most read of this year ... that was the most read story because that’s abusing human rights” (personal communication, May 30, 2016).

While little scholarly attention has been given to the responses to human rights stories in Western, developed nations, journalists in this study spoke about their belief that this positive response is unique to Rwanda and other African nations. Journalist 15 (personal communication, May 30, 2016) at City Radio explained:

It’s different [here in Rwanda] because, I think, of our past, you know, because of the genocide against the Tutsi that was perpetrated in 1994, and the fact that our country is small. The country is densely populated. We speak the same language. We feel like brothers and sisters. When the right of someone is violated, you feel like it’s yours that are violated.

Similar notions were described by Journalist 10 (personal communication, May 30, 2016), the cofounder of Umuseke.rw:

The African people, they are really concerned about things, even unnecessary things, so it’s like a cultural thing. People like to be concerned of [sic] people’s lives, and in the [Rwandan] culture ... when they see that someone need help, or that someone need support in any way, they feel concerned. You can see the concern, even from comments [on the stories], you can see the concern. So I think [the interest in human rights stories] is somehow cultural.

Journalist 17 (personal communication, June 1, 2016), news editor at *The East African*, also expressed the belief that responses to human rights articles are different in Rwanda than in developed countries for two reasons:

If you take the example of the American society, you have a very vibrant entertainment centre—Hollywood. It’s worth billions of dollars ... people are interested because you have sort of a chain of businesses built around the industry ... [W]e don’t have that. So as a developing country, people are still concerned about the basics, you know, basic life—access to food, education, shelter, health services. It’s just different from the developed world because you already have those things ... we still have many poor people ... and for these people, they need these rights because it directly affects them.

## Impact of Stories

In conjunction with the previously discussed findings of wide audiences and positive responses to human rights stories in Rwanda today, many journalists also expressed the belief that reporting about human rights violations has a positive impact on lessening the prevalence of the abuse itself in several ways, thus fulfilling Siebert, Peterson and Schramm’s (1956) notion of the social responsibility of the press. First, similar to human rights journalists in Mexico (McPherson 2012), Rwandan reporters conveyed that their work helps citizens understand their own rights. Journalist 24, a reporter at the commercial outlet *Kigali Today*, said that human rights reporting can “teach [citizens]

about *their* human rights” (personal communication, June 5, 2016). Journalist 6, a reporter at the independent station Radio Isango Star, expressed similar beliefs: “Some people do not know things about their rights and the media would try to educate them, tell them what are their rights, then they feel ‘Oh, now we need it, it was our right ... what they were depriving us was our right’” (personal communication, May 29, 2016).

However, even if an individual does not feel that his or her rights are being abused, human rights reporting can raise public awareness about human rights violations occurring in local communities. Journalist 5, a former journalist, explained “what we do is public awareness, creating awareness, on issues such as fighting malaria and stopping violence” (personal communication, May 28, 2016). Journalist 7 (personal communication, May 29, 2016) provided the example of using his reporting to raise awareness and influence post-genocide unity:

I think media has been an active role to unity. Even the fact of reporting, informing the people that, for example, the unity and reconciliation level is at 82 per cent level, and in our reporting we say that these areas need improvement, this and this and this ... these are the factors that had not been leading to complete unity.

Additionally, many journalists stated that reporting on human rights violations can force the government to pay attention and, ultimately, react. Journalist 18, an *Associated Press* reporter, said “the impact is there, because when you write, maybe, a story of a victim ... government officials can come in, maybe you can go to court, maybe try to pass conversation and maybe other organisations can come in, because you have been able to tell the story. Because when the story is not told, nobody is going to come [fix it]” (personal communication, June 1, 2016). Similarly, Journalist 7 (personal communication, May 29, 2016) described a government response to one of his human rights-related articles:

About two months ago, I was at the leaders retreat where the president was talking to the ministers and everyone, and he cited one of the stories I had just written ... [I]t was about court cases and the backlog [in processing the cases] ... Because of [the story], he was asking the guys at the ministry, “what’s going on? Why don’t we [fix] this?” and it was one of the solutions developed [at the retreat] to ensure that the backlog at the courts [is resolved]. I felt a little bit proud, so these stories actually do cause an impact.

Journalist 3, an online editor at *Izuba Rarishe*, elaborated on Journalist 7’s example by saying, “[y]ou can’t force the government to do something about it, but when you pack your story with facts, they are pressured to act or they look bad” (personal communication, May 27, 2016).

However, despite much agreement among journalists that their stories impacted the abuses, not all journalists felt that way. Journalist 20, director of the student station Radio Salus, felt that impacting the abuses was a collaborative effort across industries, not just the result of media coverage. “Sometimes you cannot say results are from

broadcasting about the issue ... [S]ometimes impact is just a result from effort of many actors—radio, women activists ... even politicians—but it is just a combination of all activities” (personal communication, June 2, 2016). Journalist 21 suggested that human rights stories can have a positive impact, but only when the journalist is not punished. “Yeah, when a journalist writes about a human right issue in Rwanda, and luckily when the journalist doesn’t get into troubles, sometimes the victims get benefits from that news story” (personal communication, June 1, 2016).

Journalist 21 brings up a crucial discussion about the freedom of journalists to write about human rights issues. Tightly controlled political landscapes, and thus the level of press freedom in a country, severely impact how regularly and in what ways journalists can write about human rights abuses (Sobel 2016), as a result making it difficult for journalists to concretely know what, if any, impact their stories have. Journalist 23 (personal communication, June 5, 2016), owner of the commercial news outlet *Great Lakes Voice*, said that media impacting the human rights abuse “doesn’t actually work” because the only issues that can change are those that the government desires to change.

For the media to be a viable [mechanism of change], the country needs to have a working opposition which is active, there is divergent views and a pluralism of ideas. Then you need to have a civil space where civil society are free to work ... Even the civil society organisations, you will find them working on gender because that’s what the government wants.

## Challenges with Reporting on Human Rights in the Post-Genocide Era

As Journalists 23 and 21 mentioned, there are challenges associated with reporting on human rights violations in present-day Rwanda. Given the relatively recent genocide, the Rwandan government has been accused of limiting press freedom and encouraging journalists to adopt a pro-government, pro-nation, stance (Sundaram 2016), which could impact what and how they report as well as their willingness to be interviewed for this study and the content of their responses. Journalist 19 (personal communication, June 1, 2016), who asked to keep his affiliation withheld, explained:

We have only a few people who dare write stories about human rights, because many people think *they* might get abused, they might get into troubles if they try to write about those stories. ... There are a lot of people who have been silenced. A lot of people have been forced not to talk about those kinds of human right issues. The government says that it is because of our background that we have to think twice before we write about those topics ... There are some who have tried and they have been frightened and they fled the country or they stayed here, but writing about human rights issues it is not an easy thing.

Journalist 18 from the *Associated Press* described how few Rwandan news organisations have the ability to write about human rights. “People who, journalists or all media houses who can do that, there are very few. In Rwanda you can talk about maybe *The East African* because this is the only media house which can talk about the abuses

[because it is not government-funded], interview the victims and bring out their stories” (personal communication, June 1, 2016). Interestingly, however, Journalist 17 (personal communication, June 1, 2016), news editor from *The East African*, does not feel like they can regularly cover human rights, but not entirely because of a lack of a free press:

Rwanda is still a very young country, especially if you look at it from the post-genocide perspective, it's just 22 years. So we cannot be compared, you know, to, for instance the U.S., where 1) you have the resources, and you have a constitution that has been in place for a very long time, you know. I know how much you guys treasure the first amendment. We are making baby steps. ... [G]enerally the media is still young, you know, you don't even have the critical mass of journalists that would be able to even push the human rights agenda. So you have really young people who are also trying to find their ground in journalism, and as such you may not see so many specialised journalists, for instance. Because in other countries you have someone, a journalist, who just focuses on that. We don't have that.

Other journalists focused on the potential dangers of writing about human rights. Two journalists interviewed for this study, Journalist 9 and Journalist 7, had previously been arrested for content they wrote or published and Reporters Without Borders (2016) noted that journalists who are critical of the government risk going to prison. Journalist 21, a reporter at Radio Salus, the student-run station, explained that this inability to criticise the government extends to the human rights landscape: “Not many journalists report on human rights because if you do that your life may be in danger.” Journalist 2 (personal communication, May 27, 2016) from Radio 10 suggested selective editing to avoid getting in trouble:

You see, when you see how the government operates, when you go out into the village and meet people, the rough interviews that you get are not really what you air. You have to edit them. You have to make sure what you are doing does not bring controversy from government institutions.

Similarly, Journalist 21 from Radio Salus explained that the level of press freedom for entertainment and sports is high, but on other subjects, “especially politics and human rights, it's very low. For instance, talking about genocide issues, [government officials] want only one version of the story ... So yeah, there is a problem with that” (personal communication, June 2, 2016). This reporter went on to explain that Rwandan journalists are in a difficult position given the recent genocide:

In 1994 genocide there were journalists being killed because they were not even in the target ethnic group but because they were neutral; they were doing balanced news reports. So, actually here it's like you take a side. Being neutral they say is impossible. You take a side ... So if you report on human rights, somebody who abused the rights of others will be offended, and if he is somebody with some power, you know, he can finish you. So that's why [journalists] fear [writing about human rights]. It's like a general trend here in Rwanda many people don't try talking about politics or human rights, no. Maybe when they know it's in favour of the government they can do that, but if not, no, they keep quiet.

Journalist 23, owner of *Great Lakes Voice*, explained which human rights-related topics journalists would be allowed to write about. “There are a lot of safe issues—write about peacekeeping, how Rwanda is the first African country for peacekeeping, and it’s true ... And talk about how Kigali is clean and organised, how our economy is doing great” (personal communication, June 5, 2016).

Journalist 18 (personal communication, June 1, 2016) from the *Associated Press* believes that the range of human rights topics that journalists can cover could be widened with more independent media organisations.

Maybe the international media can write stories, but local media cannot write such issues because the fear, number one, that if we write maybe a story that police is doing this, government is doing this, we are not going to get [advertisements], and if we don’t get adverts, we are not going to survive. And also remember most of the media houses in Rwanda are owned by the state, so you can see that the state is not going to allow such stories to come up. So it means if we had independent media houses like *The East African*, many stories would come up that would bring those perpetrators to book.

However, this lack of press freedom can also be a motivator for some journalists to keep attempting to tell human rights stories. As Journalist 23 (personal communication, June 5, 2016) explains:

When you suppress the opposition, you suppress human rights organisations, you limit people to speak. You only allow them to speak what you want them to say. When you don’t attend to the grievances and issues affecting the society and you keep this smiling face ... it comes to why I do what I do as a journalist.

## Conclusion

This study is limited in that it is based only on interviews with English-speaking journalists living in the two largest cities in Rwanda. This excluded some journalists and likely skewed the results to a more globalised and urban, less rural, perspective. Future research should interview journalists speaking an array of languages and in geographic regions outside of the city centres. Also, given the findings about a lack of press freedom in the country, it is possible that some respondents were not comfortable speaking completely candidly and their answers could reflect this. Additionally, this study only analysed journalist perceptions, and therefore cannot empirically speak to audience interpretations and actions. Furthermore, future research could analyse the relationships between the Rwandan press and INGOs in the country, particularly around the role of INGOs as providers of human rights-related information. Despite the limitations, important understandings were gained. Rwandan journalists suggested an array of possible topics and definitions of human rights, which is consistent with differences seen in the literature, yet, journalists described wide interest and positive reactions from the general public, which can be unique to Rwanda. Findings from this study taken in

conjunction with McPherson's (2012) can suggest that journalists in developing nations believe their reporting on human rights issues has an impact on lessening the prevalence of the abuse and informing audiences about their own rights.

However, concern was also expressed regarding the lack of press freedom and government control over content produced by media houses during this post-genocide time. Similar concerns regarding a government crackdown on media freedom have been documented in the popular press (Sundaram 2016), and by media watchdog organisations (Freedom House 2016; Reporters Without Borders 2016) and human rights organisations (Human Rights Watch 2016). Findings from this study lend support to those claims about a lack of press freedom as well as shine a light on the particular limits on reporting when it comes to human rights-related topics. This is limiting the extent to which journalists can fulfill the social responsibility of the press (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956), which can impact how the public and policymakers understand, and in turn, respond to human rights-related problems.

Such reporting could also suggest that journalists have different roles in Rwanda and social responsibility is not a key tenet of Rwandan journalism, but the interviewees expressed the desire to write about human rights abuses. We see a dichotomy at play here in Rwanda—journalists described the desire to write about human rights and wide interest in human rights stories among an array of audiences, particularly in this era of rebuilding, but there is also limited freedom among journalists to write about the stories and severe consequences for doing so. Given that journalists can be punished or jailed for writing about certain human rights issues, it could be argued that journalists themselves lack fundamental human rights such as free expression. Thus, it is likely that Rwandan journalists will not be able to pursue a full human rights agenda until a freer press is established in the country.

Given that Rwandan journalists believe reporting on human rights issues has a positive impact on the abuses, imagine the impact they could have if they were able to fully and freely write about these rights violations. It is clear that pressure is needed, from inside and outside of Rwanda, to encourage more press freedom, and thus to enable a more robust discussion of human rights abuses in the country.

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