RWANDA

	2009	2011
INTERNET FREEDOM STATUS	**n/a**	**Partly Free**
Obstacles to Access	n/a	14
Limits on Content	n/a	19
Violations of User Rights	n/a	17
Total	**n/a**	**50**

POPULATION: 10.4 million
INTERNET PENETRATION: 4 percent
WEB 2.0 APPLICATIONS BLOCKED: No
SUBSTANTIAL POLITICAL CENSORSHIP: No
BLOGGERS/ONLINE USERS ARRESTED: No
PRESS FREEDOM STATUS: Not Free

INTRODUCTION

Rwanda's 1994 genocide ravaged the skilled workforce and almost completely destroyed the already poor telecommunications infrastructure, leaving only a handful of telephone lines operational.[1] By 1996, when the state-owned provider Rwandatel first introduced the internet to Rwanda, approximately 1,000 lines were functioning.[2] Mobile phones arrived in 1998, but the usage rate in the first years of access was very low.[3] Since 2000, however, there has been an increase in fixed lines, mobile phones, computers, and technicians in the country. The number of internet users rose from 5,000 in 2000 to 450,000 in 2010, though this is still only 4 percent of the population.[4] More significantly, the number of mobile-phone subscribers grew from only 39,000 in 2000 to over 3 million by 2010, accounting for over a third of the population.[5]

[1] Albert Nsengiyumva and Emmanuel Habumuremyi, *A Review of Telecommunications Policy Development and Challenges in Rwanda* (Johannesburg: Association for Progressive Communications, September 2009), http://www.apc.org/en/pubs/research/review-telecommunications-policy-and-challenges-rw.
[2] Aida Opoku Mensah, "Building an Information Society—The Case of Rwanda," briefing paper, World Summit on the Information Society, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, November 2005, http://www.uneca.org/aisi/docs/PolicyBriefs/Building%20an%20Information%20Society_the%20case%20of%20Rwanda.pdf
[3] Silas Lwakabamba, "The Development of ICTs in Rwanda: Pioneering Experiences," in *At the Crossroads: ICT Policymaking in East Africa* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers/International Development Research Center, 2005), http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-93064-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html.
[4] Internet World Stats, "Internet Usage Statistics for Africa,", http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm, accessed February 12, 2011.
[5] "ICT Statistics: September 2010," Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Agency (RURA), http://www.rura.gov.rw/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=278, accessed February 12, 2011.

The increased use of the internet and particularly mobile phones has transformed Rwanda, contributing to progress in areas such as education, good governance, human capacity development, and rural community activities. Such progress is expected to continue as part of a government plan to establish Rwanda as a globally competitive knowledge-based society and economy.[6] There have been few attempts to restrict access to content or otherwise limit the use of these technologies. Nevertheless, there are concerns that other restrictions on free expression in the country will seep into the internet sphere, as occurred when the authorities blocked the online version of an independent newspaper in mid-2010. In addition, despite government efforts to enhance access, poverty and lack of appropriate infrastructure, especially in rural areas, continue to impede the expansion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in Rwanda.

OBSTACLES TO ACCESS

Widespread poverty remains the primary impediment barring Rwandans from accessing new technologies. Over 90 percent of the population lives in rural areas, with the majority practicing subsistence agriculture and approximately 64 percent living below the poverty line. In addition, about 65 percent of the population is illiterate,[7] and between 70 and 90 percent speak only Kinyarwanda.[8] The cost of internet services and private VSAT satellite links has dropped in recent years. Nevertheless, access is still limited mostly to Kigali, the capital city, and remains beyond the economic capacity of most citizens.

In the face of such challenges, the Rwandan government has made ICT development a high priority, spending far more than the average African country on the emerging sector, and instituting incentives like tax exemptions on ICT equipment. Although the full impact has yet to be felt, broadband internet service is progressively replacing dial-up connections, and a study published in July 2010 ranked Rwanda third in Africa for downloading speeds.[9] Broadband connectivity is expected to increase further with the installation of over 100 kilometers of fiber-optic cable and 3.5 gigabytes per second of WiMAX wireless capacity, bringing internet service to the countryside.[10] The recent development of e-government

[6] Glen Farell, "Survey of ICT and Education in Africa: Rwanda Country Report," *info*Dev, April 2007, http://www.infodev.org/en/Document.423.pdf.
[7] UNICEF, "Statistics: Rwanda," http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/rwanda_statistics.html, accessed August 3, 2010.
[8] Ann Garrison, "Rwanda Shuts Down Independent Press," *Digital Journal*, April 14, 2010, http://www.digitaljournal.com/article/290545; Beth Lewis Samuelson and Sarah Warshauer Freedman, "Language Policy, Multilingual Education, and Power in Rwanda," *Language Policy* 9, no. 3 (June 2010), http://gse.berkeley.edu/faculty/swfreedman/10samuelson_freedman.pdf.
[9] Bridge 2 Rwanda, "Rwanda's Internet Fastest in the Region," July 18, 2010, http://www.bridge2rwanda.org/2010/07/rwanda%E2%80%99s-internet-fastest-in-the-region/.
[10] Emmanuel Habumuremyi and Alan Finlay, "Rwanda's Policy Vacuum Could Mean Trouble for Broadband," Association for Progressive Communications, October 29, 2009, http://www.apc.org/en/news/rwanda-s-policy-vacuum-could-mean-trouble-broadban.

platforms and video conferencing has also shortened travel times, cut expenses, and improved communication among district authorities. Advanced web applications such as the video-sharing site YouTube, the social-networking site Facebook, the microblogging platform Twitter, and international blog-hosting services are freely available.

The mobile-phone penetration rate is significantly higher than that for fixed-line internet access, reaching 36 percent and 3.6 million subscribers as of September 2010,[11] according to official statistics, thereby accounting for the vast majority of telephone users.[12] Access is made easier by a well-developed mobile-phone network covering 92 percent of populated areas.[13] In remote border areas, however, coverage remains faulty or nonexistent. To facilitate greater access, the Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Agency (RURA) is attempting to reduce the price of handsets from 8,000 Rwandan francs (US$14) to 2,000 Rwandan francs (US$3.50).[14] At the current rate of mobile-phone expansion, the number of subscribers is expected to reach six million by 2015, which would be about 60 percent of the population.[15] Internet access via mobile phones has been available since 2007, but the limited bandwidth (approximately 148 kbps) has restrained its popularity. The situation is expected to improve by the end of 2010 due to several ongoing projects, including a fiber-optic cable expansion plan by the public utility company Electrogaz and a project by telecommunications operator New Artel to connect government institutions and low-income segments of the population in rural areas.[16]

Following market liberalization that began in 2001,[17] the number of companies providing telephone and internet services has increased from one—the state-run Rwandatel—to about a dozen in 2010. These include fixed-line providers(Rwandatel, MTN Rwandacell, and Artel International), mobile-phone providers (Rwandatel, MTN Rwandacell, and TIGO), and internet-service providers (ISPA, Rwandatel, MTN Rwandacell, New Artel, Altech Stream Rwanda, Value Data Rwanda, Star Africa Media, Greenmax, Augere Rwanda, and Comium).[18] Rwandatel was partially privatized in 2007, and as of 2010 the government owned only 20 percent of the company. The remainder is owned by LAP Green, a Libyan firm. The other providers are all privately owned.

The Rwanda Information Technology Authority (RITA) and RURA supervise the telecommunications sector. The government appoints the members of both regulatory bodies. In 2009, RURA set up the Rwanda Internet Exchange (RINEX) to connect internet-

[11] "ICT Statistics: September 2010," Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority (RURA).
[12] National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, "Development in ICT Sector."
[13] National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, "Development in ICT Sector."
[14] "Rwanda Mobile Penetration Hits 24 Percent," Business Monitor International.
[15] Saul Butera, "Mobile Subscribers Reach 2.4 Million," *New Times* (Rwanda), February 12, 2010, http://www.newtimes.co.rw/index.php?issue=14152&article=25176.
[16] Albert Nsengiyumva, Emmanuel Habumuremyi, and Sharon Haba, *Pro-Poor ICT Project Report—Rwanda* (Kigali: Making ICT Work for the Poor, July 2007), http://propoor-ict.net/docs/rwanda_report.pdf.
[17] Nsengiyumva and Habumuremyi, *A Review of Telecommunications Policy Development and Challenges in Rwanda*.
[18] National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, *ScanICT Baseline Survey Report* (Kigali: National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, November 2008), http://www.uneca.org/aisi/docs/RWANDA_SCAN_ICT_REPORT.pdf.

service providers (ISPs) and enable local internet communications to be routed through RINEX without having to pass through international networks.[19] ISPs may also opt to connect via RINEX to the international internet. The aim is ostensibly to make intra-Rwandan internet communications cheaper and faster, though such control over internet traffic could also facilitate any future efforts to systematically censor or monitor domestic online communications. As of the end of 2009, only several ISPs were properly connected to RINEX, and the price for national access remained the same as for international.[20]

LIMITS ON CONTENT

Access to online content in Rwanda is generally unfettered. The websites of international human rights organizations such as Freedom House, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch, as well as the online versions of media outlets like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), *Le Monde*, Radio France Internationale, and the *New York Times*, are freely accessible. The websites and blogs of opposition activists both within and outside Rwanda are also freely available.[21] Similarly, one of the founders of the online news portal Igihe.com reported no constraints or pressures from the government in establishing and managing that website.[22] Nevertheless, the web versions of state-run media outlets, such as *Imvaho Nshya*, *La Nouvelle Relève*, the Rwanda News Agency, and the *New Times*, dominate the online information landscape.

Despite the generally open online atmosphere, an incident in the months leading up to the August 2010 presidential election raised concerns that the authorities are willing and able to restrict online content. In April, Rwanda's two main independent newspapers, *Umuseso* and *Umuvugizi*, both published in Kinyarwanda, were given six-month suspensions.[23] Although the newspapers were officially suspended for defaming the president and other offenses, the decision was widely perceived as an effort to suppress critical coverage in the run-up to the election. *Umuvugizi*'s editor, who fled into exile, launched an online version in late April, but in early June the Media High Council ordered that the website be blocked, arguing that the ban on the newspaper had to apply online as

[19] Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Agency (RURA), *Guidelines for Rwanda Internet Exchange Point (RINEX) Management* (Kigali: RURA, 2009), http://www.rura.gov.rw/docs/RINEX_GUIDELINES.pdf.
[20] Antoine Bigirimana, "Rwanda: The Story of the Internet—One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward," *New Times*, December 12, 2009, available at http://allafrica.com/stories/200912150559.html.
[21] This includes the website of opposition leader Ingabire Victoire Umuhoza at http://www.victoire2010.com, as well as other sites at http://ww.iwacu1.com, http://ww.musabyimana.be, http://rwandarwabanyarwanda.over-blog.com, and http://ww.banyarwandapoliticalparty.org.
[22] Interview with Founder of Igihe.com in February 2010.
[23] Michael Fairbanks, "Nothing Good Comes Out of Africa," *Huffington Post*, May 3, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-fairbanks/nothing-good-comes-out-of_b_560639.html; International Freedom of Expression eXchange (IFEX), "Rwanda Shuts Critical Papers in Run-Up to Presidential Vote," news release, April 13, 2010, http://www.ifex.org/rwanda/2010/04/14/papers_suspended/.

well.[24] As of August 2010, the site remained blocked by all ISPs, but by year's end it was available again, as the six-month suspension had expired. The newspaper *Umuseso* does not have an online version. Appealing such a ban is possible based on provisions of the media law, although in this instance, the publications chose not to appeal. Many online journalists based in Rwanda, like their print and broadcast colleagues, engage in self-censorship, particularly on topics that might be construed as disturbing national unity and reconciliation. The High Media Council has been known to contact websites and request that they remove certain information. In addition to *Umuseso* and *Umuvugizi*, this has also reportedly occurred with the online news websites Umusingi and Umurabyo, which have been asked to remove content related to local political affairs and ethnic relations. In terms of the economic environment for online news websites, independent outlets often face challenges gaining advertising from government ministries or state-owned enterprises, as well as benefiting from direct subsidies, which are common sources of income for state-run media. There are no clear regulations outlining treatment of obscene content, but Article 57 of the 2009 Law on Media indicates that cybercafe operators, parents, and business owners are expected to take the lead in preventing minors from viewing websites that display pornography, or information that might incite them to crimes such as drug use or theft. [25]

As internet access has expanded, the Rwandan blogosphere has evolved into a lively space, largely consisting of youth who write on a variety of topics, including their political views. However, opposition supporters living outside Rwanda, especially in Europe and the United States, are responsible for most of the criticism of the government that appears on forums, websites, and blogs. Facebook is also emerging as a popular site for online interaction, with around 70,480 users, of whom 70 percent are between 18 and 34 years of age.[26]

With mobile phones more widely accessible than the internet, text messages have become an important way for citizens to voice discontent with the authorities and expose abuses of power. In one widely reported example in 2009, several local officials and other well-to-do residents stole cows that had been donated by the president for needy residents in the countryside. The theft was reported to local radio stations via text messages, sparking widespread coverage by the media. As a result, the officials were forced to resign or were otherwise punished. Text messages were also used for political mobilization during the 2003 and 2008 elections. In 2010, they enabled the National Electoral Commission to improve voter education and allowed candidates and political parties to mobilize supporters. In particular, contenders from parties other than the ruling party were able to garner more votes than they might have otherwise due to the ability to reach voters via text-messaging

[24] Reporters Without Borders, "Persecution of Independent Newspapers Extended to Online Versions," news release, June 11, 2010, http://en.rsf.org/rwanda-persecution-of-independent-11-06-2010,37718.html.
[25] "Law on Media," *Official Gazette of the Republic of Rwanda*, August 17, 2009, available at http://www.mhc.gov.rw/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=81&Itemid=144&lang=en.
[26] Facebakers, "Facebook Statistics: Rwanda," www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/rwanda accessed December 29 , 2010.

campaigns.[27] The ability of citizens to use digital media for organizing large-scale "real life" protests remains limited, however, due to broader restrictions on freedom of assembly, particularly regarding politically sensitive topics.

VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS

The Rwandan constitution, adopted in May 2003, provides for freedom of expression. In addition, Chapter IV of the new Law on Media,[28] signed in August 2009, is dedicated to "ICT or internet press" and includes language that explicitly grants freedom for online communications. Article 56 of the law guarantees every person the right to create a website through which he or she can publish "information to a great number of people." Article 58 extends provisions of the law on print and audiovisual materials to ICT communications. While some provisions are irrelevant to online expression, several permissive and restrictive aspects of the legislation may be applicable. These include a prohibition on censorship, on the one hand, and criminal penalties for showing contempt for the president, and restrictions on certain coverage of the executive, judicial, and legislative branches, on the other.

Rwanda's generally restrictive legal environment for traditional media could be applied to the internet, particularly given the lack of a fully independent judiciary. For example, the decision to ban the online version of *Umuvugizi* was based on vague charges of publishing "divisive language,"[29] a category of expression that is criminalized by the 2001 Law on Discrimination and Sectarianism. This provision was also used to ban the print version of *Umuvugizi*, and is often invoked to silence government critics.[30] Similarly, penalties for criminal defamation in print and broadcast media may be applicable to the internet, though they have sparked complaints from media workers and may be revisited and amended in the near future.[31]

Although many traditional journalists view the threat of imprisonment as a key constraint on their work, such punishment is rare for online expression. Idesbald Byabuze, a Congolese journalist and professor who was temporarily teaching in Rwanda, was arrested in February 2007 and held in detention for one month while awaiting trial on charges of

[27] Dominique Nduhura, "Rwanda: Media Coverage of the Parliamentarian Elections (September 15, 2008)," paper presented at the World Journalism Education Congress, Grahamstown/Rhodes University, July 2010, http://wjec.ru.ac.za/index.php?option=com_rubberdoc&view=doc&id=96&format=raw.
[28] "Law on Media," *Official Gazette*.
[29] Media Institute, "Tabloid Website Blocked," IFEX, June 8, 2010, http://ifex.org/rwanda/2010/06/08/umuvugizi_website_blocked/.
[30] Law No. 47/2001 on Prevention, Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Discrimination and Sectarianism, available at http://www.adh-geneva.ch/RULAC/pdf_state/Law-47-2001-crime-discrimination-sectraianism.pdf; Jennie E. Burnet, "Rwanda," in *Countries at the Crossroads 2007* (New York: Freedom House; Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), http://freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=140&edition=8&ccrpage=37&ccrcountry=167.
[31] "Law on Media," *Official Gazette*.

"segregation, sectarianism, and threatening national security" for several articles he had written. These included a June 2005 piece about human rights concerns in Rwanda that was published on an overseas website. The charges were dropped after his release, but he was quickly deported from the country.[32] Since 2007, there have been no other reported cases of legal or other harassment for online expression, possibly because most activities by opposition forces are carried out in foreign countries.

In a case that signaled the possibility of violence against print journalists creeping into the online sphere, in June 2010, Jean-Leonard Rugambage, an editor for *Umuvugizi*, the above-mentioned newspaper which was banned in April 2010 but continued to publish online, was assassinated in front of his home in Kigali. Rugambage was the last of the publication's journalists to remain in Rwanda and was reportedly preparing to join colleagues in exile due to threats and intimidation.[33] In November 2010, two individuals were convicted of the killing, claiming it was reprisal for acts of violence Rugambage allegedly committed during the 1994 genocide. However, fellow journalists expressed skepticism over the handling of the case, believing the murder was punishment for critical reporting on the government.[34]

Monitoring of online communications does not appear to be widespread. However, there have been several instances in recent years of e-mails, phone calls, and text messages being produced as evidence in trials; these were mostly obtained via low-tech methods of confiscating suspects' mobile phones and computers rather than via service providers. There have been no reported cases of serious cyberattacks in the country. RURA has initiated a strategy to increase awareness of such threats among business owners and ordinary users.[35]

[32] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Rwanda," in *2007 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, March 2008), http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2007/100499.htm; International Press Institute, "Democratic Republic of Congo," May 8, 2008, http://www.freemedia.at/regions/africa/singleview/4140/.
[33] Danny O'Brien, "Six Stories: Online Journalists Killed in 2010," Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), December 17, 2010, http://cpj.org/internet/2010/12/online-journalists-killed-in-2010.php.
[34] "Journalists Killed in 2010: Jean-Léonard Rugambage," Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), http://cpj.org/killed/2010/jean-leonard-rugambage.php, accessed February 12, 2011.
[35] Aimable Karangwa, *Cyber Security and CIIP* (Kigali: RURA, n.d.), slides, http://www.rura.gov.rw/publication/Cyber_Security_and_CIIP.pdf, accessed November 22, 2010.