

## Social media and the need to uphold responsible journalism

Whether local journalists were wondering whether to give or deny active members of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) a platform to air their views through the media, whether political parties should own media enterprises, or if the government was looking to controlling social media, a one day workshop on media social responsibility helped provide some answers.

By [Eugene Kwibuka](#) 10 Jun 2013

Held in Kigali on Thursday [6 June 2013] under the auspices of the National University of Rwanda (NUR)'s School of Journalism and Communication and Search for Common Ground, an international NGO that works to transform conflicts, the 'National Conference on Media Social Responsibility' helped journalists, media scholars, and policy makers to exchange ideas on practices, policies, and ethics of the media in the country.

The discussions which attracted about 80 participants would sometimes become heated as journalists listened from theories advanced by media scholars to try and explain their work, government policies on the media, and how they should behave as reporters with regard to reporting about genocide ideology, political disagreements, and businesses of ordinary citizens.

At one point, a journalist asked a media scholar who had wrapped up her presentation on peace and conflict reporting in Africa's Great Lakes region if political parties should own media enterprises. The media scholar Dr. Margaret Juuko who teaches at the National University of Rwanda, responded that no one can restrict people on what to own or not.

"It is a human right. You cannot question people on what to own," she said.

She explained that what the government and the society have the right to judge and perhaps control is the content produced by the media.

"If a political party owns a media institution, then we should advocate for good content," she said.

And what do you do as a reporter when you have to write an objective story about a government which has decided that it won't hold negotiations with terrorist groups such as the FDLR which espouses the genocidal ideology against Tutsi?

A hot debate by the journalists and media scholars seemed to have concluded that handing microphones to known criminals in the name of balancing the story is simply unacceptable, at least in Rwanda where a living testimony of the crimes perpetrated by elements of the FDLR is everywhere.

And if any jurisprudence is needed in order for Rwandan journalists to make up their minds on the FDLR issue, some experts in the workshop advised that their counterparts in the West can help because they apparently do not air views of Nazism custodians or leaders of Al-Qaeda, a terrorist group.

With the current proliferation of the use of social media where it is increasingly possible for people to air their views in whatever form, some journalists were wondering if the Rwandan government has some plans

to control social media.

The answer, which came from the Media Development Coordinator at the Rwanda Governance Board, Ignatius Kabagambe, was probably not what many people would expect because it was a big no.

"We are not even thinking about that," he said, explaining that government is busy promoting good governance to ensure freedom of speech and expression instead of controlling what they say in the social media.

Kabagambe told journalists that he wouldn't mind distributing connected computers and iPads to Rwanda because he doesn't think they would use them to rebel against government that has done a lot to empower them.

One media scholar and lecturer at the National University of Rwanda would use a different strategy if he were given a job to advise the government. While he wouldn't succeed in controlling what people say in the social media, he would use it to extensively market the positive things that the government has done.

"When you want to beat a serious team, you play their game," he said, explaining that in case social media help to fuel conflicts, the same platform needs to be harnessed to contain them.

Overall, the training which also recommended that journalists start thinking about promoting peace through stories, helped participants assess their freedom, understand the nature of the media business, and assess the situation of media practice in Rwanda.

"It was like a barometer for us," observed Joseph Njuguna, the director of the School of Journalism and Communication at NUR.

Source: [allAfrica](#)