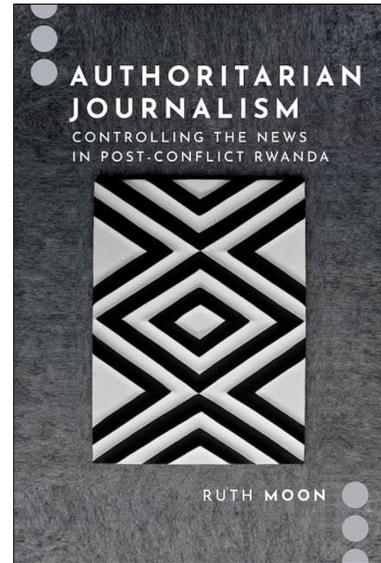


Ruth Moon, **Authoritarian Journalism: Controlling the News in Post-Conflict Rwanda**, New York: Oxford University Press, 2024, 210 pp., \$99.00 (hardback).

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Journalism scholars have long drawn on ethnographic methods to illuminate the complex and often competing imperatives that guide news workers' labor. From the foundational early studies on how journalists create and negotiate their norms and values (Gans, 1980; Tuchman, 1980) to more recent ethnographies that explore the interconnections between physical newsrooms and digital spaces (Bunce, Wright, & Scott, 2018; Domingo & Paterson, 2008), journalism researchers often venture into the places where news work happens. There, they inevitably face the challenges of gaining the trust of the journalists whose labor they are studying, and of navigating the political and cultural tensions that are inextricable from the site of study.



Facing these challenges can be especially difficult for researchers who study news work that crosses geopolitical borders, or news labor that is considered “foreign” to North American or Western European journalism scholars. How do these researchers avoid reproducing the colonialist impulses that guided anthropology in its early days, for example, and will they remember to take a hard, critical look at themselves to ensure that their own privileges are not causing them to misunderstand or ignore the valuable perspectives that journalists outside the United States, Britain, and Canada have to offer?

In her stunning new book, **Authoritarian Journalism: Controlling the News in Post-Conflict Rwanda**, Ruth Moon grapples with these tough questions, offering a nuanced account of 21st-century Rwandan news work that is forthright in its assessment of the author's own privileged positioning in the research process. Rather than stopping at what Maton (2003) has called “reflectivity”—which he defines as an almost self-absorbed exercise in which authors perfunctorily reflect on their own “history, social position, and practices” (p. 56) without considering the actual impact of these identities on the research process—Moon engages in a brave discussion of how her Whiteness and “Western-ness” influenced her interactions in the field, giving her an uncomfortable “expert status” among some news workers, while “making [her] a target of critique” in other situations (p. 23). She also interrogates how her identities shaped her early assumptions about Rwandan journalism, assumptions that she was crucially able to change over time: “I realized I had assumed that journalists would share a global desire for autonomy and the ability to critique powerful people” (p. 23).

Moon's observations are important because her book, by its own admission, raises questions about “the problematic assumptions that shape observers' views of journalism practice in [Rwanda]” (p. 4). According to Moon, these assumptions take the form of myths that then impact the real-life ability of

journalists to do their work. The first myth is that Rwandan journalists were responsible for the 1994 genocide (p. 64). Moon calls this a myth after providing detailed evidence to the contrary, suggesting that time and research has shown that Rwandan media in the 1990s only played a limited role in the conflict. Even so, this myth is one that many Rwandan journalists themselves share. Since, as Moon suggests, most contemporary Rwandan journalists were not working as professionals in the mid-1990s, the myth of the "villainous" Rwandan news media is even more powerful; indeed, this myth causes present-day Rwandan journalists to consent to others treating them with suspicion or limiting their autonomy.

Another myth that Moon identifies in her book is that Rwandan journalists "might unwittingly provoke similar violence again" (p. 66). Moon explains that this myth stems from the broader belief that the 1994 genocide arose without a clear cause, leading journalists and their editors to rely heavily on official accounts of newsworthy events and to avoid stories that might create chaos. This fear has wide-ranging ramifications, according to Moon: "Many journalists in Rwanda are uncertain in their ability to appropriately manage a high degree of social power, so they embrace or accept a field position of limited power" (p. 70).

Key to challenging these assumptions is Moon's assertion that, while Rwandan journalists certainly experience constraints on their work, they do "exercise agency" (p. 27) to demonstrate a crucial skill: They "navigate intricate social dynamics and use them to their advantage" (p. 26). *Authoritarian Journalism* unpacks this argument point by point. After chapter one presents readers with Moon's main arguments, chapter two provides a detailed overview of the forces that shape Rwandan journalism, particularly focusing on the "strong state" that characterizes the Rwandan government, as well as illuminating the financial precarity in which Rwandan news media operate. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, Moon shows that journalism in Rwanda can be seen as a "weak field" (i.e., a field lacking much autonomy) because "the strong state extends to journalists, imposing ambiguous but restrictive boundaries on news production" (p. 29). Within these boundaries, where the "political landscape signal[s] appropriate, inappropriate, and risky behavior" (p. 29), journalists still have the agency to garner social capital by building relationships and personal reputation, as well as by cultivating a general sense of credibility and legitimacy around their work. Still, this social capital can only take them so far.

Chapter three examines in more detail the myths that define contemporary journalistic practice in Rwanda, drawing on rich accounts from the in-depth interviews that Moon conducted with journalists, as well as from the ethnographic observation she did on site. Chapter four investigates another commonly held belief in Rwanda: that Rwandan journalists are undertrained and unprofessional, thus justifying that they be "trained" and "developed" by both the Rwandan government and Western journalism organizations.

Chapter five delves into the political economy of Rwandan journalism, crucially foregrounding another major pressure that Rwandan editors and reporters experience: financial precarity. Because tougher investigative journalism is risky in Rwanda, it also does not tend to be financially lucrative. On top of this problem, Moon notes that many Rwandan journalists are expected to write a certain number of stories per month, per their news company's rules. This leads them to only pursue more creative and critical stories that discuss lower-powered people, while playing it safer in their coverage of the powerful.

Finally, chapter six looks at the local journalists in Rwanda who work for transnational or global news outlets. In a fascinating twist, Moon shows that these individuals have more autonomy to challenge the status quo in Rwanda; yet they also occupy “peripheral roles in both global and local fields” (p. 139). For this reason, they do not have much power to intervene in the myths that delimit most Rwandan journalists’ abilities to work freely.

A fascinating read that offers colorful, thick descriptions of the site that Moon studied, *Authoritarian Journalism* is a formidable addition to the research on news labor in the Global South. While the book does draw heavily on Bourdieu’s field theory—which seems to be increasingly overused in journalism studies—in Moon’s case, the theory makes good sense. Although the book could conceivably draw more pointedly on theories found in decolonial studies, the major insights from those theories are present, and the book is successful in its goal of “mak[ing] it apparent that journalism is enabled and restricted as much by narrative and belief as by policy and regulation” (p. 171).

These narratives and beliefs are not only held by Rwandan journalists but also by journalists and scholars based away from Rwandan society. Moon’s compelling book is therefore situated firmly within the scholarly research that critiques Anglo assumptions about news cultures in disparate parts of the world (Arjomand, 2022; Ashraf & Phelan, 2023; Seo, 2016). The book also joins a vital conversation on the importance of ethnographic, empirical research that de-Westernizes English-language journalism studies (Blacksin & Mitra, 2024; Mitra, Palmer, & Seo, 2024). For this reason, Moon’s book resonates for journalism scholars and ethnographers more broadly. African studies researchers will find the book useful as well because it takes such a nuanced, cautious approach to understanding journalism in an extremely complicated sociopolitical context.

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