

Reticent Digital Diasporas in Times of Crisis

The Shifting Emotion Work of the Burundian Diaspora

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Abstract

Based on fieldwork amongst Burundians in Rwanda, the Netherlands and Belgium, this article explores how information circulates transnationally in times of political and violent crisis and how ordinary members of the diaspora seek to manage these flows of information. Our main argument is that conflict in the homeland creates a massive flow of information across various digital platforms and that while members of the diaspora eagerly take part in consuming and sharing this information, they do so reticently. Rather than simply explore the information flows, their intensity, their 'spread' or their content, we explore how individuals in the diaspora engage in emotion work, as they struggle between being 'hailed' by the images and messages flowing with ever-increasing intensity, speed and urgency and their reticence towards getting too involved.

Keywords

emotions – kin – conflict – diaspora – Burundi

Résumé

Basé sur des travaux de terrain auprès de Burundais au Rwanda, aux Pays-Bas et en Belgique, cet article explore la manière dont l'information circule par-delà les frontières en temps de crise politique ou de conflit ainsi que la manière dont les membres ordinaires de la diaspora tentent de gérer ces flux d'informations. Notre principal argument

est le suivant: les conflits qui éclatent dans le pays d'origine engendrent un flot massif d'informations sur les différentes plateformes numériques et si les membres de la diaspora consomment et partagent massivement ces informations, ils ne le font pas sans une certaine réticence. Au lieu d'analyser ces flots d'informations, leur intensité, leur circulation ou encore leur contenu, nous défendons l'idée que les individus au sein de la diaspora se livrent à un travail émotionnel entre lutte contre ces images et messages qui les 'harponnent' avec une intensité et une vitesse croissantes et envie de ne pas trop s'impliquer.

Mots-clés

émotions – famille – conflit – diaspora – Burundi

1 Introduction

I am invited to join Gervais at his lunch table in The Hague.¹ My dress sticks to the seat, which I am told is probably because his two-year old son likes to climb chairs and always has sticky hands. The I-phone on the cupboard plays church music from Burundi. 'Radio Maria', explains Gervais, "because RPA and Radio Isanganiro have been shut down" (Gervais, The Hague, 2016).² Gaining access to reliable information on Burundi has become difficult, he adds, justifying why they are not listening to the lunch-time news broadcast; previously the most important one for Burundians in and outside the country.

Especially at the start of the crisis, Gervais was very concerned about his mother, brothers and other family members who stayed in the country, that he himself had traded for the Netherlands more than 20 years ago. Gervais fled the decade-long civil war that pitted Hutu against Tutsi and cost an estimated 300,000 lives between 1993 and 2005. The present crisis was triggered by President Nkurunziza's decision to run for a third term, which caused thousands of people to take to the streets in protest. The protests in turn were fiercely

1 This is a pseudonym. All the names in this article have been changed in order to protect the identity of the respondents.

2 RPA (Radio Publique Africaine) and Radio Isanganiro (Radio Meetingpoint) are independent radio stations that have provided critical journalism on the political situation in Burundi since the early 2000s. They have been supported by international donors for their role in peacebuilding and national reconciliation. In 2015 RPA offices in Bujumbura were closed by the authorities. Both radio stations now broadcast via streaming.

clamped down upon by the police and the youth wing of the ruling party, once again causing hundreds of thousands of Burundians to leave the country. During the present crisis, Gervais' relatives stayed in Burundi "because they have not been specifically targeted". Still, some of them had moved to neighbourhoods in the capital city, Bujumbura, that were less prone to violence, and some more distant relatives had been killed or had disappeared. His relatives sometimes shared updates about the situation in Burundi, but in general both sides tried to limit exchange about this topic. "I do not talk a lot, hey, also over the phone, because the situation is not trustworthy". Most information he received about the conflict therefore was through WhatsApp groups that he joined for this purpose. This form of communication was not without distress either:

Some nights were really difficult, to know that this neighbourhood is surrounded and there are people who are dead or have been killed [...] then you'll call, with so much fear, with so much fear, you call to hear which people have been arrested or uh ... but you are also afraid to call because you fear something bad has happened ...

GERVAIS, The Hague, 2016

Burundians like Gervais have lived outside the country for decades, and are concerned with the safety of relatives and home country. Conversely, Burundians who fled the country after 2015 are constantly seeking information in order to make strategic decisions whether to return or not, or to help and convince family members to join them in exile.

Charline is one of the Burundians who fled the recent violence. We met Charline in her small house in Kigali in August 2015, shortly after the crisis had broken out. Charline fled Burundi to Rwanda by car with her two small children, while her husband had remained in Bujumbura in order not to lose his job. During our interview, she received a phone call and seemed quite upset. After the interview our research assistant, herself a Burundian refugee, explained that it was the husband who had called, and that they had been discussing the fact that her boss had warned her that she would lose her job as an English teacher, if she did not return now.

Charline told her husband that she would return with the kids, and he had got angry with her on the phone, claiming that it would be dangerous for her because the *imbonerakure* (militias supporting the ruling party) might hear that she had returned and that she was on the list (she claimed that the *imbonerakure* had lists of Tutsi to be killed) (Fieldnotes, Kigali, August 2015). Charline's access to information – whether by phone, WhatsApp or rumours from

fellow refugees – although at times emotionally distressing, was essential for the decisions concerning her very near future: decisions about life and death.

2 Diaspora, Media and Kinship

In this article, we seek to tease out the Burundian diaspora's multifaceted engagements with information and communication about the ongoing conflict. We explore how information circulates transnationally in times of political and violent crisis and how ordinary members of the diaspora seek to manage these flows of information. Wherever exiled Burundians are, they are part of an ongoing flow of information concerning the ongoing political crisis in the country. They have to balance between the emotional strain that this information creates and an urge to know what is happening 'at home'. There is, in other words, an ambiguous relation to 'knowing', entangled with kinship relations in home and host countries. These lead to what we call 'reticent diasporic engagements': alternating and sometimes simultaneous surge *and* retraction of diasporic engagements with the country of origin. If one simply focuses on the spread of information – the supply side, so to say – one might get the impression that diasporic engagement simply grows with the growth of information flows due to the spread of ICT and social media across the continent. However, people like Gervais teach us that the recipients of these flows attempt to filter and sort the information that they are exposed to and that this entails a lot of emotion work (Hochschild 1983; 1979) and relates to kinship and family.

This article positions itself between literature on diaspora and conflict (Koser 2007; Smith & Stares 2007; Bernal 2005; Axel 2002), which tends to ignore affect and kinship relations, and literature on transnational families and emotions (Berckmoes 2018; Baldassar 2014; Åkesson et al. 2012; Boccagni 2012; Parreñas 2005; Mahler 2001), which tends to ignore the importance that crisis and conflict play in such affective relations. Much has been written about the role of diasporas in conflict and the use of information technology since Anderson (1994: 326) coined the term "long-distance nationalism" where he worried about the effects of the fax machine on the accountability of long-distance nationalists, and there has been a long debate on the role of diasporas in peacebuilding (Bush 2008; Cochrane 2007; Lyons 2007; Smith & Stares 2007; Tölölyan 2007; Bernal 2004; Wayland 2004; Skrbis 1999). In our previous work with the Burundian diaspora, we also focused on the ways in which the diaspora engaged with the conflict at home, for better or for worse (Turner 2008a, 2008b, 2007). Common to this body of work is an assumption that ICT has led

to an increase in diaspora engagement and that diasporas seek by all means to access and control this information for political purposes.

In our recent fieldwork, we found – as the introductory vignettes demonstrate – that engaging with the home country and the conflict also poses emotional strain on the members of the diaspora. While this may entail psychological distress (c.f. Song 2015), we explore here how these strains are not limited to the individual and how they emerge in relations between kin and inform diasporic engagements. When Gervais explained that communicating with relatives in Burundi is difficult, it was not merely because it was emotionally distressing to hear about the violence taking place in his home city, but also because of the strains on his relationships with his home country and relatives. Likewise, there is the emotion work of trying to protect his immediate kin – his child, living with him in the Netherlands – from the violence in the homeland. Here, we may find inspiration in the writings by sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983, 1979), who proposed an emotion-management perspective, and literature on transnational families and ICT (Berckmoes 2018; Baldassar 2014; Madianou 2012). Hochschild (1979) argues that emotion can be and often is subject to acts of management. Transnational family literature, furthermore, explores how ‘emotion work’ is required when families live apart and family structures, roles, rights and responsibilities are no longer a given. In previous work, we found that ICT play an important role in the strategies migrant parents employ to resolve tension in their transnational family life (Berckmoes 2018; see also Baldassar et al. 2016; Nedelcu and Wyss 2016; Kilkey and Merla 2014; Parreñas 2005).

In this paper, we want to bring the analysis of the emotion work of transnational families to the context of violent, political conflict and digital diasporas. Our main argument is that conflict in the homeland creates a massive flow of information across various digital platforms – twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, text messaging – and that while the diaspora eagerly takes part in sharing this information, they at times do so hesitantly. Victoria Bernal (2017) has similarly critiqued the idea of ever-expanding information flows in the diaspora, and has interrogated ‘silences’ on Eritrean diaspora websites which were due to the emotional stress of conflict. While Bernal explores silences around the trauma of war and violence of members of the diaspora, we interrogate how Burundians outside Burundi try to protect themselves and their closest from the constant flow of potentially traumatic texts and images. They feel an emotional ‘cost’ of being ‘hailed’ by the images and information that they are confronted with on a daily basis, while the emotional costs of engaging or not are significantly related to kinship. People simultaneously seek and shun information about their loved ones, in order to know about their situation whilst also pro-

tecting themselves from the feeling of helplessness or protecting other kin from the emotional stress that 'knowing' may entail.

Based on longitudinal fieldwork, we place the present predicaments of people like Gervais and Charline and the present digital media picture in a historical context. First, we explore how Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and changes in the political field in Burundi have influenced the flow of information over the past decades. While during the ethnic conflict in the 1990s, members of the diaspora saw it as their duty to disseminate whatever information that they could find, the Burundians living in the diaspora today are overwhelmed by information. After this, we explore how in the present crisis Burundians manoeuvre this transnational field as well as the emotion work at play, trying to balance between a desire for information, the difficulties of 'knowing' and the emotional strain of witnessing the suffering of kin and others without being able to do much about it from afar.

The emotional strain may be twofold: first, the difficulties of signifying the information – of never knowing for sure – is frustrating and tiring. Second, witnessing suffering from afar, without being able to do much about it, is emotionally stressful. Members of the Burundian diaspora are in other words caught in a dilemma where they invest emotionally in seeking knowledge and certainty while also fearing the emotional costs of this knowledge. In this manner, they become *reticent diasporas*. We conclude that in order to understand digital diasporas in conflict situations, it is important to acknowledge not only the urge to engage with the homeland and to seek and distribute information through social media, but also the emotional work of protecting oneself and one's kin from such information.

3 Doing Multi-sited, Longitudinal Ethnographies of Digital Diasporas

To explore the shifting ways for the diaspora to engage with information and communication about the conflicts in Burundi historically, we bring together bodies of fieldwork findings that have been collected by the first and second author over the course of different fieldwork locations and periods. In this way we can see how the changes in ICT over the past twenty-five years have changed the ways in which information is shared in situations of conflict and how, more recently, the diaspora has related to this.

To reconstruct the media landscape and the way Burundians engaged with information and communication about conflicts during the civil war, which lasted from 1993 to 2005, we draw mostly on the fieldwork of Turner among Burundians in Belgium and Denmark between 2002 and 2004. During these

fieldwork periods, he explored how Burundians were organised in the diaspora both politically and socially, and how they related to – and sought to influence – the political situation in the homeland. A significant finding was the burgeoning use of the internet to share information and political ideas (Turner 2008a). We explore similarities and differences between findings at that time and more contemporary findings about the way Burundians engage with information and communication during the present political crisis in Burundi (2015–present). For the latter, we draw mostly on fieldwork material collected by Berckmoes, who conducted fieldwork research in Burundi in a project that ran from 2014 to 2016, and a collaborative project by both authors in the Netherlands, Belgium and Rwanda (2015–2017). For the latter, Berckmoes visited and interviewed more than sixty Burundians in Belgium and the Netherlands. Meanwhile, Turner conducted fieldwork among Burundians in exile in Rwanda. He interviewed twenty refugees in Kigali in August 2015, and another twenty-seven in July 2016, including ten from the previous year.

Burundian interlocutors in the Netherlands and Belgium, interviewed between 2015–2017, were found primarily through snow-ball methods, using different entry points to ensure inclusion of people with different (ethnic) backgrounds, political positions and personal stories. Many of them had either left their home country over a decade or two ago, or were born as children of Burundian refugees and other migrants. They comprised people of a variety of ages (from 18 to 60+), and while representing a range of political preferences, most interlocutors identified as not politically active at present (i.e. they were not a member of a political party or representative of a particular constituency, such as found in civic society foundations), although some had been in the past. Roughly half of them had left Burundi during previous conflicts, while some others had moved for marriage or studies after the civil war, or had been born as children of first-generation refugees and other migrants. In Rwanda, our interlocutors had fled recent violence (2015 and later) and settled in Kigali city. Most were acquainted by us through a Burundian friend or Burundian research assistant, both in exile since the beginning of the political crisis. Interlocutors in Rwanda were all Tutsi and had mostly fled from Burundi's capital city, Bujumbura.³ In both contexts, we also asked about whether and how they maintained contact and interest in their home country, thus directing us to specific social media platforms and sources relevant to our interlocutors.

3 While virtually all the Burundian refugees in Kigali were Tutsi, the vast majority of Hutu who fled the 2015 violence, settled in Tanzania.

As with much longitudinal ethnography, the objectives and the approaches have changed over the different fieldwork revisits, making diachronic comparison in the classic, sociological sense difficult. However, as Burawoy (2003) reminds us, reflexive ethnographic revisits are still possible and fruitful, if only we are sensitive to such shifts in position and approach. In the following we outline the challenges of studying digital media and our shifting approaches from the late 1990s until today; not only has the digital media landscape changed globally, the access to and use of such media have also changed radically in Burundi and its diaspora. Furthermore, our approach to digital media has changed as has the political environment in Burundi.

In the early 2000s, when very few Burundians inside the country had internet access and the internet was mostly one-way without possibilities to upload or comment on content, our approach was to explore the online political struggles and the narratives that they created. From sifting through the websites and from interviews with their founders, we estimate that probably less than a few dozen individuals produced the vast majority of the content for these sites. Inspired by Bourdieu's thoughts on how individuals manoeuvre the political field (Bourdieu 1991), we term these individuals 'political entrepreneurs' (Turner 2010). They need not necessarily have official positions in political parties but use the political field to acquire political and social capital. Our analytical strategy was to treat these sites as discourses and analyse them in the context of the political changes in the country. Our second fieldwork took place during and after the 2015 violence. At this point in time, the digital media landscape had changed, both due to the emergence of social media platforms and to the fact that many more Burundians had access to these media. While 0.1% of the population were internet users in 2000, this figure rose to 1.1% in 2011 and 5.5% in 2017.⁴ And while there were 64,000 mobile phone subscriptions in Burundi in 2003, this figure had risen to 5.92 million in 2017.⁵ Furthermore, news that is received via social media may be shared with many more people (Paviotti 2019: 353). For Burundians in the diaspora, this rise in the use of mobile phones and internet users inside the country meant that connections with family and friends could be re-established and intensified, as Facebook, WhatsApp and Viber, among others, enabled cheap, direct communication. In December 2017, there were 450,000 registered Facebook subscribers in Burundi.⁶ Twitter

4 Internet World Stats (6 November 2019), <https://internetworldstats.com/af/bi.htm>.

5 ITU statistics (6 November 2019) <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

6 Internet World Stats (6 November 2019) <https://internetworldstats.com/af/bi.htm>.

differs from the other platforms, as most tweets are in English or French rather than Kirundi or Swahili (Falisse and Nkengurutse 2019: 182). Furthermore, there are profiles on Twitter that have tens of thousands of followers.⁷ While the social media landscape has changed radically since the early 2000s and access to ICT has increased dramatically, our analytical approach has also changed. Our recent fieldwork has been less concerned with the political discourses of the digital media and more concerned with how people use the media and are affected by them.

The following empirical analysis falls in four parts. The first two trace how historical changes in the political landscape in Burundi – from one-party, authoritarian rule by a Tutsi minority, over civil war to consociational power sharing and a vibrant media landscape, and finally to renewed political violence – have affected the position of the diaspora and its use of digital media. We also show how new digital technologies have had their influence. The last two sections explore more in depth how members of the present diaspora navigate the digital media landscape. First, we explore how they seek knowledge – as opposed to mere information – in the complex and overwhelming information flows. Then, we explore how they employ various strategies of emotion work in order to avoid the emotional strain of too much information.

4 The Shifting Roles of the Diaspora and Information

In April 2003, in a small terraced house in Schaerbeek, Brussels, Claude showed us into his study. Claude was a friendly, elderly man with adult children who were born in Belgium. He arrived in the early 1970s to study. We were interested in talking to him because he had been active in establishing the first Hutu organisations in exile in the 1970s and was at the time of our meeting the country representative of a small faction of a ‘Hutu’ party. In his study, we were overwhelmed by the stacks of paper, binders, pamphlets and books that piled up everywhere on the shelves and tables. Even the walls were covered. Apart from the usual photos of political leaders, there were big black and white photos of open trucks carrying dead bodies and something that appeared to be a

7 Willy Nyamitwe, special ambassador and spokesperson for President Pierre Nkurunziza, has (per 17 July 2018) 82,500 followers on Twitter and has tweeted 33,900 times. In the year from 8 May 2016 to 6 June 2017, @willynyamitwe was mentioned 141,400 times. Human rights activist Pacifique Nininahazwe has (per 17 July 2018) 66,100 followers on Twitter and has tweeted 12,100 times. From March 26, 2016 to April 25, 2017, @pnininahazwe was mentioned 90,300 times by 13,900 users, 76% of these were retweets.

mass grave. The photos were blown up to a degree that the images were blurred. We had seen these photos before, in books, pamphlets and websites, and knew that they allegedly portrayed Hutu bodies that were massacred by the Tutsi-dominated army in 1972.

In 1972 a small Hutu revolt in the southern part of the country resulted in massive retaliation by government troops that systematically killed up to 150,000 Hutu, mostly the educated (down to secondary school) and the elite who were assumed to be the ringleaders behind the plot.⁸ This watershed event forced hundreds of thousands of Hutu into exile, mostly to neighbouring Tanzania and Rwanda, while some fled to Europe – in particular to the old colonial power, Belgium. Claude was among the latter. From 1972, Burundi was under an authoritarian one-party rule, with political and military leadership in the hands of a regional and ethnic clique of Tutsi from the southern province, Bururi (Lemarchand 1996).

Meanwhile, all mention of ethnicity was officially banned as it was perceived by the government to promote colonial ideas of divide and rule. The early 1990s saw some gradual reforms, culminating in the first democratic elections in 1993 with a landslide victory to a moderate Hutu, Melchior Ndadaye. This did not last long, however, as Tutsi officers kidnapped and killed the president after three months in office, plunging the country into a series of political and constitutional crises that developed into an all-out ethnic war. In August 2000, the Arusha peace accords were signed, paving the way for a transition to peace. Only in 2005 did the last rebel movement lay down its arms.

There was a sense, visiting Claude, that he was living in a time pocket. His study was intended as a witness to past atrocities, but had also become a witness to past means of communication. He tried to keep up with news from Burundi but had to get his son-in-law to print the news from the various Burundi websites. He had been politically active at a time when the one-party state controlled all information within the country (Laely, 1992). Claude and his comrades in exile in Belgium therefore saw it as their duty and their prime responsibility through meetings and printed newsletters to challenge what they perceived to be the 'Tutsi lies' that the government was spreading to the 'big nations' (Turner 2004, 2005). Hence, the photos of dead bodies and mass graves.

In the 1990s however, the information that Claude and his comrades were spreading was challenged by other Hutu movements that were using the relatively new internet as their platform for spreading their versions of events

⁸ For a detailed analysis, see Lemarchand and Martin (1974).

(Turner 2008b). When we met Claude in Brussels, the picture was becoming even more blurred. First, as a result of the Arusha peace accords, the political field had shifted gravity from the diaspora to Burundi (Turner 2008b). The diaspora could no longer claim that the regime was in the hands of a clique of Tutsi who were hiding the truth, as the transition government was comprised of Hutu and Tutsi, and the rebel armies were being integrated into the national army. Second, the flows of information had changed character due to changes in the media landscape. While Claude and his comrades had photocopied pamphlets, a number of internet sites dedicated to Burundi were emerging in the late 1990s. They all claimed to be nonpartisan and non-ethnic and concerned with promoting peace and human rights. Yet, back in 2002–2003, Burundians in Belgium and Denmark would often tell us with a grin that one only had to read the first half page of a website in order to tell the ethnicity and political allegiance of the authors. The majority of these sites were run by individuals or small groups based in Europe or North America.

Two types of websites emerged in the early years of the transition from conflict to peace, after the Arusha accords had been signed but before the first elections (2000–2005). On the one hand were sites like *Burundi-sites* and *Agora* (both no longer active) that claimed that their main role was to stick to the original role of the diaspora, namely to be watchdogs. They did not trust the peace accords nor the transition government which they perceived to be covering up the truth of the real power in Burundi. We have not systematically studied how Burundians in Burundi and in exile have related to these websites. Yet, many of the Burundians in Belgium and Denmark at the time were conscious that these media were ‘biased’ and appeared to read them ‘cynically’.

The second type of websites were making the transformation from watchdogs to nation-builders in the early 2000s, engaging actively in the peace building process (Turner 2011). We followed some of these sites over a period of five years – from 2003 to 2008 – and could see how they would diversify the contents and themes of the sites to cover culture, economy and sports, rather than simply focus on conflict, ethnicity, history and politics. There would be exchange rates, air tickets, banking options for diasporas and property for sale. One might say that Burundi used to be an abstract, lost nation over which to fight political struggles (Jeganathan 1998). Now it became a real place that one could travel to, return to, or invest in.

The new phase of increased political stability was accompanied by a gradual increase in press freedom inside the country. For International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) Burundi even became a laboratory for ‘peace journalism’. By 2005, “the Burundian media sector had become a model of pluralism and journalistic professionalism” (Frère 2017: 4). Political constraints on

free press were no longer more important than economic constraints (Fiedler and Frère 2018). In the context of increased freedom of expression and a mushrooming of media outlets and critical journalism within the country, the diaspora lost its position as watchdog (Turner 2011). Instead, Burundians in Europe and North America began travelling to Burundi to visit family.

With time however, the ruling party CNDD-FDD (coming into power in 2005) developed mechanisms to gain more control on the space of free speech (Frère 2017). Especially in the years after the 2010 elections, more and more national and international organisations spoke out against the increasingly authoritarian tendencies of the regime (Boshoff & Ellermann 2010; Human Rights 2010a, 2010b). The press law was reformed in 2013, imposing new constraints on the media. The regulatory body CNC (National Communication Council) was used to repress the media, threatening or suspending some of them while arresting journalists (Frère 2017: 5). Simultaneously, Burundians inside Burundi were increasingly gaining access to the internet, and two-way communication was becoming more accessible.

In sum, the diaspora played an essential role in spreading information during the one-party regime when internal opposition voices were muted. With the emergence of new digital media in the late 1990s, different factions of the opposition in exile used these media to promote competing 'truths' about the nature of the conflict in Burundi. The information was in other words 'filtered' by these political entrepreneurs. This situation changed in the post-conflict period when a vibrant media emerged inside Burundi, producing a lively critical debate, and making the political entrepreneurs in places like Switzerland, Belgium and Denmark superfluous. In 2015, Burundi once again was swallowed by violent conflict and censorship of the media, yet compared with the previous conflict the social media landscape had changed radically. Members of the diaspora were now exposed to large amounts of unfiltered, non-stop information in real-time. Where the diaspora from the 1970s to the 2000s was far from reticent – seeking as much information as possible about the home country – the new media landscape in 2015 called for new ways to engage with digital media.

5 New Violence in a New Information Landscape

In April 2015 President Nkurunziza announced his bid to run for a third term. This decision was problematic and seen by many as unconstitutional and in contradiction with the Arusha accords. Thousands of Burundians took to the streets to express their dissatisfaction with the decision. People in Burundi as

well as members of the diaspora engaged in the protests by calling in on independent radio stations in Burundi that were broadcasting the events. They – political and non-public figures – used the media to express their own dissatisfaction and to mobilise and encourage the (young) people in the streets. For instance, Alice, a young mother who has lived in the Netherlands since the early 2000s, explained to us that she had called in on a Burundian radio channel because she wanted to express support for the young people in Burundi. She had however adopted a false name, in order to protect family members who were still in Burundi.

The crisis escalated from day one, as the police clashed violently with protesters (and with excessive force; see Van Acker 2015). The youth wing of the ruling party, the *imbonerakure*, in collaboration with the secret service threatened, beat and abducted individuals from the neighbourhoods where the anti-third-mandate protests were taking place. Moreover, to hamper the protests, the regime intervened in the information flow in Burundi by temporarily disabling regular access to, among others, WhatsApp as it was used by protesters to organise their activities. For some weeks, people could not access WhatsApp directly on their phones, but only through a WIFI connection or with VPN technology, which was not available to most users.

In May 2015, a coup attempt was foiled. When the failure of the coup became clear, the offices of the four most prominent private, independent radio stations were raided and one of them (RPA) was burned down, as the regime accused journalists of supporting the coup attempt. Many journalists fled the country for fear of their lives; by July 2015 more than 80 Burundian journalists were abroad (Frère 2017). With the destruction of the independent broadcasting sector in Burundi (Frère 2016), Burundians inside the country and abroad turned to social media for communication on the crisis (Vircoulon 2016). Social media were used to maintain contact with people in other locations, to share information about dangers in particular areas, as well as to speculate about developments in the political domain (Ibid).

The increased reliance on social media marked the beginning of a new era where information was no longer in the hands of an elite only, as many Burundians inside and outside Burundi had access to the internet and a phone with a camera (Frère 2016). Politicians, journalists and other professionals still had roles, yet they had to be played differently. For instance, some journalists exiled in Rwanda were able to create alternative media outlets with radio programs such as 'Inzamba' and 'Humura Burundi', which were (and still are) disseminated through social media networks. Other journalists became activists and started to share their views on blogs, following different professional rules than they would have in their previous positions. Similarly, journalists in Burundi are

still struggling to carry out their profession in the radio and newspaper outlets that remain or have been newly established (Frère 2017).

As suggested above, the Burundian diaspora has long been actively engaged in consuming, contesting, creating and distributing information about the conflicts in the country (Turner 2008a, 2008b). However, the speed and scale of information flows has grown explosively since the late 1990s. Moreover, with the new importance of social media, information has become instant, multi-directional, and a site for conflicting parties to clash and mobilise people for their cause. Thus, on 15 November 2016, the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) launched the Twitter campaign with the hashtag #StopThisMovie. It linked to what seemed like a movie trailer of a film called 'Genocide in Burundi', with the tag line 'The only movie you don't want to see'. It was intended for people to show solidarity with the Burundian people and urge the United Nations (UN) to act against human rights abuses in the country. The hashtag was used 13,023 times from November 2016 to August 2017 (mostly in France (49.8%) while just 6.6% in Burundi). A counter-campaign was launched just one week later by the president's advisor, Special Ambassador Willy Nyamitwe. In an attempt to discredit FIDH's report 'Repression and Genocide Dynamics in Burundi', he used the hashtag #ThisIsMyGenocide, implying that it was the Hutu who had been the victims of a genocide in 1972, where both his father and the president's father had lost their lives. This hashtag was used 7,590 times, predominantly in Burundi (67%).⁹ Such online battles were, furthermore, supported by actual visits of representatives of the Burundian government to diaspora events. For instance, we participated in an event in the Netherlands in 2017, in which special ambassador and spokesperson Nyamitwe and the Burundian ambassador to France were special, albeit unexpected, guests. The organiser visibly nervously welcomed both guests to the event, where they were given a podium to present their views. Although the event had been intended as non-political and rather focused on economic development, particularly Nyamitwe used the occasion to delegitimise critical voices, presenting a Powerpoint dismissing the opposition's 'lies about Burundi'.

Thus, while the traditional media had been under increased pressure since at least 2010, they – most notably radio stations – had by regional standards remained very outspoken and critical of the regime in place (Frère 2017). It was only in relation to the 2015 violence that they were seriously challenged and

9 The campaign seemed to backfire, as many tweets expressed distaste for the hashtag (Paviotti, 2019; Falisse and Nkengurutse 2019: 185).

new forms of communication were needed in order for Burundians inside and outside the country to keep up with the events. A new generation of political activists was exiled. Additionally, 'ordinary Burundians' such as most members of the diaspora we then met, started to participate in the information flows, seeking in their own ways to influence political developments in Burundi. These were sometimes hesitant involvements, however, in order to protect family members in Burundi from possible negative repercussions. Furthermore, they were reticent in the manner that they on the one hand needed to engage with the digital information in order to find some certainty about the situation in Burundi while on the other hand being well aware that they could not trust much of it.

6 Truth in Information on Social Media

The vast amounts of information and communication on political developments on social media as well as the conflicting narratives they represented, required people to critically sort and assess social media accounts. Truth-telling and withholding truth has always been an important – and much debated – part of Burundian political culture, with a number of local sayings that make reference to the art of concealing and unveiling the truth. According to Russell (2017: 63) "(s)hades of silence are a common element of everyday sociality and a recurring motif in the imagination and mediation of power". He argues that silence in Burundi "may be the strategic act of a dependent expressing obedience or loyalty to a superior, or the expression of that superior's innate superiority, or the sensitivity and caution of relative equals avoiding topics of pain, trouble or embarrassment". Turner (2005: 51) notes that "[b]oth those who seek to unveil the secrets of those in power and those who seek to guard them perpetuate the idea that they exist". While we do not want to suggest any essential cultural trait, the search for hidden truths and exposure of lies clearly permeates political debate in and on Burundi. In this regard, a young, highly educated man from Bujumbura explained that for Burundians being discrete is an important value in both private and public domains. While 'important information' should not be hidden, he suggested, it would be a mistake to think that the opposite of 'being discrete' (*kugira ibanga*, which has a positive meaning) is 'being open', even when it comes to politics (Bujumbura, 2 May 2015).¹⁰

10 Cross-translation with two other Burundian individuals confirmed that the opposite of *kugira ibanga* (being discrete) is *kumenibanga*, which literally translates as 'to reveal a

In relation to the ongoing battle on social media, truth-finding is perceived to be particularly problematic for people outside Burundi. Most Burundians we spoke to suggested that truth-finding might even be impossible. Carine, who is in her forties, left Burundi in the mid-2000s. She argues that given her physical distance from Burundi she had to give up on 'really knowing' what is happening in her home country:

If you are in the Netherlands, you can never know the truth, be sure of the truth. Everybody tells you what they want you to know. [If I am] on that side, I can tell you that the government is killing people, and on the government's side in Burundi, they will go to the internet and you see that the opinion is the opposite, different opinion. If you are in the Netherlands, you can never know the truth. Never.

CARINE, Netherlands, 2016

While the diaspora used to see it as their duty to disseminate whatever information they had, Burundians living in the diaspora today are overwhelmed by information. They are acutely aware that there are many truths and that they cannot always trust the information that they access. This leads them to be tempted to simply give up and stop seeking news from Burundi. The impossibility of fact-finding about political crisis developments in Burundi, nonetheless, did not discourage most people from actively pursuing information about the crisis on Facebook and other internet platforms. As Carine stated in the same interview: "I cannot keep distance, I have to know what happens" (Carine, Netherlands, 2016).

Likewise, even though many Burundians we spoke to felt unsure about their ability to find out exactly what was happening, this would not necessarily keep them from participating in the information and communication flows themselves. Participation takes different forms. Some people shared information on Facebook, via WhatsApp, or on Instagram that had first appeared on specific online platforms, such as the newly established media outlets based in Rwanda or elsewhere (e.g. 'Inzamba', 'Humura Burundi', or Iwacu). A good example is the weekly 'Cri du coeur des parents épris de paix et de sécurité au Burundi' (Cry from the heart of parents in support of peace and security in Burundi), a radio message delivered by a Burundian woman representative who has lived in Belgium since the early 1990s and which is spread with the help of Facebook

secret' and is attributed to persons 'without esteem', with a 'bad reputation', 'bad habits', or who are 'not to be trusted'.

and WhatsApp. The aim is, like in the past, to pass the truth about injustice in Burundi to Burundian and international audiences, and thus fill a gap that emerged in the context of repression of critical voices in Burundi.

Second, messages with or without date or source mentioned are regularly forwarded in bulk, again particularly through WhatsApp. For Terence,¹¹ in his twenties, his estimation of reliability of the information as well as the newsworthiness of the content informed his decision to forward a message or not. The following exchange about a video of an interview with an FNL (Front National pour la Libération) partisan shared with us through WhatsApp, for instance, provides some insight into how reliability was assessed.

Lidewyde: Do you know from when this film dates?

Terence: I can find it. The one who sent me this one is a FNL, he is around 40, he is a degree holder. For sure he knows what he is doing.

Lidewyde: Why does he send this to you do you think?

Terence: He did not send to me, but to a WhatsApp group.

WhatsApp, April 2017

Similarly, other interlocutors regularly shared news about political developments with us and other people in their networks when they felt that it was a critical event to take note of, or when they wanted to raise alarm.

A third category concerned the sharing of, or commenting on statements made by politicians, activists and even scholars, especially on Twitter, but also through public profiles in WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook. In this regard, social pressure to publicly demonstrate one's allegiance also compelled people to participate in the information and communication flow. Some people changed their WhatsApp profile picture to show a picture of the late General Adolphe Nshimirimana (who had died in an attack in Bujumbura, 2 August 2015) or the Burundian president, or alternatively used logos of the opposition on their Instagram and Facebook accounts. People also posted statements on events happening in Burundi. For example, Carine – who was presented to us as 'radical' and a strong pro-government advocate by Gervais, quoted at the start of the paper – explained that she engaged with social media to express her political, or rather ethnic, allegiance. This she felt was the real issue at hand: "The Burundian problem is not easy to understand if you are not Burundian,

11 Terence is a Burundian studying abroad. He previously worked with Berckmoes in a research project, and wants to pursue a career in research. In this vein, he regularly shared information which he felt might be important to Berckmoes, as a (future) fellow researcher.

people tell you no it is not ethnic, but deep down, it is only ethnic". The possibility to engage, furthermore, allowed her to 'shock' people: "It is just for laughs". Similarly for Vanella, who is in her fifties and left Burundi in the early 2000s, expressing political allegiance and supporting the ruling party also appeared as the main theme of her online engagements. On a weekly and sometimes daily basis, she retweeted positive news about the Burundian government and contested Tweets or people whose Tweets reflected negative on Burundi's president and the ruling party. Her Tweets regularly accuse opponents of lies: "You seem to have the illusion that *lies* will give you power, but you will not get anywhere without participating in the elections".¹² For her, the crisis and ongoing debates in the media compelled her to speak out against what she saw as wrongs, while it also allowed her to give expression to the grievances she endured in her life, especially during the past civil war, and which were still haunting her today.

While people like Carine and Vanella may be interested in trying to get to the truth of the matter, beyond the apparent lies of her opponents, there is also a certain performativity to the online activities, where they not only perform vis-à-vis political opponents and allies but also with an eye to a larger audience: the international community. The same counts for Terence and others, who sometimes saw in us gateways to this 'community'. Our previous fieldworks revealed a strong sense of there being 'big nations' out there who can affect the conflict and who are being fed with lies and deception by political opponents (Turner 2004). Information and knowledge, as well as social media channels, are therefore seen as important weapons that have larger, influential audiences. This seemed especially important given the general sense of helplessness: "Yes, it is challenging. I am in the Netherlands, I go read the news, but I cannot do anything" (Carine, Netherlands, 2016).

Renewed interest in developments in Burundi among both Burundian and non-Burundian audiences and the availability of ICT thus provided an opportunity for people who long left the country to re-engage with home politics. At the same time, people who had previously not been politically active, suddenly felt themselves called to start engaging, without necessarily considering themselves 'political activists'. One of the clearest examples may be found in a newly established youth organisation in Belgium, *Jeunesse Ubuntu*. The majority of its members have not grown up in Burundi, but felt compelled by the stream of brutal images of violence in Burundi to engage with Burundi and the conflict. A core motivation of the young people in this group, was to call for

12 Paraphrased to preserve anonymity; our emphasis.

change, which they felt could not come from their parent's generation: "(the old men's) objective is to take over power, our objective is to say: stop killing, we want to live in peace" (one of the founding members, August 2017).

In sum, the renewed crisis in Burundi has re-activated its digital diasporas. As radio stations were closed and journalists feared for their lives, the political field once again moved beyond the territory of the nation-state, and information once again found other routes and forms. However, as opposed to the 1990s, the political entrepreneurs in Belgium and elsewhere have greater difficulties in monopolising the flows and in filtering information to suit their purposes due to the changes in information technology. This does not imply that digital media are democratic or 'flat'. Twitter, especially, is dominated by a few influential figures – often politicians, human rights activists or journalists – who have thousands of followers. Furthermore, with the constant flow of real-time information, Burundians in exile are forced to make hard choices about how to sort and assess the veracity of the information they receive, and whether or not to contribute to the information stream themselves. While this is common for anyone living in the 'information age', there are certain predicaments that are particular to the diaspora in situations of conflict. Assessing the reliability of digital information is for these people a matter of life and death.

Overall, members of the Burundian diaspora seemed to be sceptical of the social media information on crisis that they encountered, sometimes doubting the possibility of 'truth' altogether. Thus, while many consumers became producers themselves, some would also regularly halt the information flow, such as when doubting the veracity or relevance; they engaged reticently.

7 Emotion Work

Besides the need to assess the truthfulness of mediatised information, members of the diaspora feel that they need to emotionally manage the information flows. Social media images and witness accounts about explicit violence intrude constantly and directly into the private sphere, 'hailing' the recipients, demanding that they react, appealing to their sense of obligation. In this following section, we explore therefore how members of the diaspora try to protect themselves and their kin emotionally from the images and witness accounts that constantly appear on their screens. Especially as the crisis continued, we heard more and more people in the diaspora trying to tune out of the information flow. They needed to balance their quest for information with their emotional well-being or the demands of everyday life. They were what we term *reticent* in their engagement with the potentially harmful information.

In December 2015, just after a military base in Bujumbura had been attacked, one of our interlocutors, Alice, who lives in a village in the Netherlands called us to share her anxiety. Crying on the phone, she explained how the children she was taking care of in Burundi had locked themselves in their home in Bujumbura, waiting and afraid. They had called to tell her that government forces were in their neighborhood to seek out perpetrators – and anyone else who could have been supportive of the opposition or the attack. Alice had to hang up because, even though she knew they needed her comforting, she feared that staying on the line and comforting ‘her children’ might mean that she would have to witness (hear) the inevitable. The instant connectedness, for her, meant that she was experiencing the crisis as if she were present, while simultaneously reliving the horrors that she had endured during the civil war in the 1990s.

Similarly, Carine, whom we mentioned earlier, explained that she tried to limit her engagements with the crisis as a way of protecting herself emotionally:

See, I, I, I, I sometimes do not read news from Burundi. No I do not want to (...) There is negative news all the time, people in a group, have murdered, news and I see blood (claps in hands). I cannot handle it. (...) It happens every day, and euh ... if I see it every day, I will have to go to a psychologist. I cannot.

CARINE, Netherlands, 2016

In Kigali, we also met Burundians who had felt a need to disengage from the news coming from Burundi. Agnes’ family was split between Bujumbura and Kigali. She lived in Kigali with her children, while her husband had remained in Bujumbura, where he was an accountant. Agnes feared every time the phone rang that it would be bad news from home. She did not fear that her husband would be targeted, as he “is not political”, she explained. But she feared that it might “all explode”, as it had in 1993 and that he may be killed then. As we got further into the conversation she talked about the emotional stress of not knowing what might happen in Burundi, but also her strategy of not wanting to know. At one point she used to worry so much that she got lost driving home one day, and went to the doctor who told her, she had a depression. She felt better now, she explained, because she had God, and because she tried to avoid any news about bad things in Burundi. “I know, it might be a bad strategy, but it’s my strategy” (Agnes, Kigali, 2016). While Agnes claimed that she had closed off all information from Burundi due to a mental breakdown and depression, she did still keep some sources of information open in order to keep up with her closest kin. Most of our interlocutors in Kigali practiced a fudged engagement with the home country: pragmatically reticently engaging while also trying to

avoid the negative effects. As much as they loathed the gory photos of maimed bodies that were shared in WhatsApp groups, they also felt it was their duty to witness them.

Most of our interlocutors – whether in Rwanda or Europe – received images of lifeless and often tortured bodies on Bujumbura's streets and in gutters via Whatsapp and many would comment on these images with anger and despair. The Belgian based Burundian youth group *Jeunesse Ubuntu*, for instance, referred to these images to explain the birth of their group (see above). At the same time, over the course of our fieldwork, we learned that various members of the group alternated tuning in and out to balance their everyday life in Belgium with their concern for kin in Burundi and the situation in general. One of the young women in the group told us that she had failed several study courses because the crisis in Burundi made her change her everyday priorities. She started to focus more on Burundi and less on her life in Belgium. Meeting her two years later, she explained that she had had to cut back her presence on Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook because she had felt too stressed about what she was seeing online and wanted to finish her studies.

Burundians in exile thus seemed split between protecting themselves emotionally from the images and witness accounts constantly appearing on their screens, while simultaneously seeking information in their attempts to monitor the conflict and anticipate the future. Particularly in Kigali, the Burundians were on the one hand seeking out information in a struggle to understand the conflict and to be able to make concrete, immediate decisions about their own lives and the lives of their closest kin. On the other hand, in both Kigali and in Europe, Burundians were constantly confronted with images on their phone screens of anonymous dead bodies, calling on them to “do something”, if only to bear witness to the evils of the regime and hail the international community to react.

8 Conclusion

In this article, we have explored how the Burundian diaspora engages in producing and consuming information about conflict from a historical perspective. As political crisis once again has hit Burundi, the role of the diaspora and in particular the digital diaspora in mediating the conflict, once again has become important. While in the 1970s and 1980s, information flows were slow and under the control of a selective group of political entrepreneurs like Claude, this changed in the 1990s with the burgeoning of ICT and with the gradual opening of the political field inside Burundi. In the early 2000s, when

the civil war was still ongoing, Burundians in the diaspora and in Burundi had learned how to 'decipher' the very politicised and polarised websites. They were what might be called 'ironic users'. With the present crisis, the amount of information is overwhelming and people have to balance their craving for accurate information about the political situation and information about the safety of friends and family, with their everyday life in exile and emotional well-being. Indeed, engaging with the information and communication about the crisis in Burundi was not without emotional costs. The changes that we observed, apply to members of the present diaspora, among whom some arrived a decade or two ago, while others arrived recently. To us it seems therefore not a function of different generations; neither in terms of life course nor in terms of arriving cohorts. We argue that the changing ways of engaging with the homeland depend on the one hand on historical changes in the political field, and on the other hand on changes in the media landscape.

Our findings resonate with Axel's (2002) study of Sikh diasporic websites, where he explores how the images of Sikh martyrs circulate so that Sikhs across the globe may bear witness to their sacrifices to the Sikh cause and to Khalistan, constituting an important aspect of a 'diasporic imaginary'. We propose that something similar might be taking place when Burundians share the images of mutilated bodies, albeit in a less organised, and ritualised manner. Yet while Axel, like most diaspora scholars, is concerned with the production of the diasporic imaginary – what others might call diaspora identities – we also looked at that the reception and/or rejection of such images, and find that it is informed by the uneasy awareness that competing versions of truth circulate as well as the emotional cost of seeing and acknowledging images of violence and hardship.

Rather than simply explore the information flows, their intensity, their 'spread' or their content in a historical context, we thus argued here that individuals in the diaspora engage in emotion work (Hochschild 1979, 1983), as they struggle between being 'hailed' by the images and messages flowing with ever-increasing intensity, speed and urgency and their reticence towards getting too involved. In this regard, Baldassar et al. (2014) argue that social media and ICT not only allow for quick and cheap transnational communication but also 'hail' transnational family members, compelling them to keep in touch. "You *can* Skype for free – therefore you *must* Skype with me every other day!" This places an emotional strain on family members, they argue, who cannot escape transnational family obligations (Baldassar et al. 2014).

The strain that our interlocutors experienced was of a slightly different character to the one described by Baldassar et al. (2014). For Burundians in exile, particularly those who left during previous time periods, the social media mes-

sages 'hail' them to 'care for' their kin back home. To 'care for' is not only in concrete terms of aiding and assisting but also a more emotional call to 'care about' them and not forget them, as described in the transnational family literature (e.g. Akesson et al. 2012; Boccagni 2012; Parreñas 2005; Mahler 2001). The same goes for the nation; those in exile are hailed to 'care about' their nation and not forget it. Meanwhile, they feel powerless to make any substantial changes and they need to care for and about their daily life and immediate kin in the country where they live. In other words, apart from the emotional strain of kinship obligation that Baldassar et al. (2014) describe, the Burundians in Kigali, Belgium and the Netherlands, needed to take into account the fear and discomfort 'knowing' would entail for themselves or their close kin with them in exile; regarding the fate of their kin in Burundi, the traumatic memories information could trigger, or the discomfort about not being able to do much. They thus needed to adopt 'strategies', as Agnes said, to manage emotions in their transnational (family) lives (see also Berckmoes 2018), including limiting questions to those in Burundi and getting offline.

If one focusses solely on the volume and speed of information flows, one might get the impression that diasporic engagement simply grows in a steady flow of things. Our findings rather point to 'mixed rhythms' – both running and standing still. We have observed alternating engagement and disengagement with media flows, and reticence due to a number of mechanisms. We argued that key mechanisms include uncertainty about the truthfulness of claims, fear for consequences for kin who stayed behind, emotional strain of being confronted with hardship while unable to change the situation, and emotional strain because they were triggering memories. This article has thus shown how Burundians try to balance these forces pulling them in different directions, leading to reticent diasporic engagements.

Our theoretical claim then is to not assume that social media flows increase automatically and steadily with its availability, but that we should both investigate how the flows develop over time and map the mechanisms that influence it. In the context of exiled Burundians, especially the dynamics about truth-claims and experiences of emotional strain showed to be of key influence.

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