

# Rwanda: Memorialisation in the Global Digital Economy

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we describe our recent empirical engagement with Kigali Genocide Memorial (KGM), Rwanda, and present initial insights that have emerged from our analysis. The study aimed to understand the work practices at KGM as a cultural institution operating in a post-genocide context, examining how the staff use digital technologies to support their work and connect with communities of stakeholders. Adopting a Grounded Theory approach, we structured our methods for engagement in dialogue with our partners and participants. Our preliminary findings reveal the workings of a national cultural institution in the course of its development, located at a historical moment wherein it is serving both national and international communities in remembering the past and also envisioning the future. We point to challenges and opportunities voiced by the staff for serving these communities and participating in a global digital economy.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

## General Terms

Design, Human Factors.

## Keywords

Memorialisation, Rwanda, genocide education, social enterprise

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Rwanda is a small, landlocked country in sub-Saharan Africa, familiar in the global public consciousness for the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi minority group. This genocide arose from ethnic divisionism between Hutu and Tutsi peoples, arguably established under colonial rule. It was ended in June 1994 by military intervention from the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) who overturned the government, installing their own leadership, which remains in power to the present day. In 2003, Rwandan government representatives visited the National Holocaust Centre in Laxton, UK, established by The Aegis Trust, a charity and NGO supporting international genocide prevention and awareness [1]. These representatives then approached Aegis asking for their support in creating a genocide memorial centre in Kigali (Rwanda's capital city). With the support of the Rwandan government and Aegis, the Kigali Genocide Memorial (KGM) opened in 2004 [2]. Aegis continues to support the centre and has

a 10-year contract (to 2020) to manage operations. In this period, Aegis will help KGM establish itself as an international, self-sustaining institution, functioning to commemorate, educate, and motivate genocide prevention.

Rwanda is a country part-defined by a government-set agenda of rapid social, economic and technological development, made manifest in a vision statement to transform the country by 2020 "from an agrarian subsistence economy to a sophisticated knowledge-based society" [3, p.9]. This 'Vision 2020' further sets out a strategy for transforming Rwanda into a regional "telecommunications hub" encompassing IT infrastructure and service sector development, and ICT education. One overarching objective, to be facilitated by this development, is "regional and international economic integration" [3, p.11] in complement to political stability. Vision 2020 thus offers insights about the political landscape in which KGM is operating. And whilst the emergence of Rwanda's envisioned knowledge economy is currently all but burgeoning, its tourism industry is developing rapidly: the Rwandan economy is now heavily supported by tourism, and KGM is viewed as a leading visitor destination [4].

In this paper, we describe our recent empirical engagement with KGM and its partner, The Aegis Trust. This research is framed by the country's efforts to memorialise the victims of the genocide and the government's plans for development, just introduced. Our study, positioned within the field of human computer interaction (HCI), aimed to understand how KGM operates as a cultural institution established in a post-genocide context, and how the staff use digital, Internet-enabled technologies to support both their work and the developing vision for the centre.

Our study was conducted as part of a broader project, 'Pervasive Monuments', which aims to understand and explore digital technology support to visiting and managing memorials and monuments. This project is interdisciplinary and motivated by HCI literatures that acknowledge the importance of studying digital support to memorialisation, as well as thanatosensitive design for the creation, management and interaction with digital memorials and data pertaining to the end-of-life [5]. It is also motivated by transnational HCI discourses that explore methodological issues for doing research across national and cultural borders [6], and by literatures from multiple disciplines on cultural visiting, place identity [7], education [8] and development studies that explore the notion of participating in a global digital economy [9]. Within this broader remit, our study in Rwanda aimed to understand specifically the *management* of KGM, and generate accounts by KGM staff on the nature of their endeavours and the challenges and opportunities they face integrating digital technology into their work. We herein present an overview of our empirical engagement and then signpost some initial key insights that have emerged from our discussions with KGM staff and other stakeholders.

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*Digital Engagement '11*, Nov 15–17, 2011, Newcastle, UK.

## 2. STAKEHOLDER DISCUSSIONS

Our research was conducted in partnership with KGM and The Aegis Trust, and we intended for our engagement to unfold as a dialogue with these stakeholders. The Aegis Trust agreed early on to facilitate discussions with key contacts at KGM, who headed up the three main ‘work units’ at the centre: Education; Documentation; and Social Enterprise. A Grounded Theory approach was deemed appropriate for the study design [10], and, in consultation with our stakeholder contacts, we organised for three one-day workshops to take place, each relating to a work unit and attended by the associated staff. Our contacts further recommended we conduct interviews with the Director of KGM and local representatives from a pan-African telecoms company. We were also invited on a tour of the KGM Documentation Centre, a standalone facility within the grounds that archives physical and digital resources documenting the genocide. Interview schedules and workshop plans were also made in consultation with our contacts

We visited Kigali in March 2011 and spent time at KGM, experiencing the centre, observing staff and visitor interactions, and conducting the workshops and interviews, which were video-recorded. Whilst there, we were directed by the staff to visit two rural memorial sites outside Kigali. On our return to the UK we also conducted a further formal interview with one of the Aegis Directors, to gain a strategic perspective on KGM operations and on the relationship between the Aegis Trust and KGM. We analysed the video data qualitatively, eliciting codes that captured phenomena in the discussions that were voiced as significant.

## 3. PRELIMINARY RESEARCH INSIGHTS

Herein we present some initial insights from our study. Given the space constraints of this paper format we do not include data excerpts; rather we outline key *endeavours* that we found KGM to pursue in its work practices, and scope out analytic themes.

The principal function of the KGM is to **promote genocide education and awareness**. Consequently the centre employs a director of education and several teaching staff, engaged in a programme of teaching Rwandan school children about genocide events in conjunction with tours of the exhibition at the centre. KGM aims to engage as many schoolchildren as possible and address the spread of ‘genocide ideology’ in Rwandan schools. Further to this ‘mission’, there is active development of an ‘education outreach programme’ that will see the production of a touring exhibition to rural communities, engaging them with KGM’s curated materials, and enabling the centre’s communication with those who might otherwise be excluded from the education message. The challenges of this endeavour suggest potential roles for technology (ICT) as an enabler, in providing rural school children with access to KGM’s digital resources and finding new forms of engagement with the content that is archived there. There is further scope for understanding how technology might also offer ‘safe-spaces’ for conducting educational activities, including discussion on sensitive and difficult topics.

Significant to the work of the KGM is the newly opened Documentation Centre [11], created for **curating physical and digital archives** of material documenting the genocide, digitising many of the physical items (photos, newspapers, documents etc.), and providing online access to these, along with video-based survivor testimony. This unit is further exploring how best to serve the different user communities, such as the KGM education staff and international visitors and scholars. A challenge for staff is to ensure that the archive materials can be made available to

these wider communities whilst keeping control of the curated message and intent that is also presented. Our discussions repeatedly revealed tensions on how the KGM message was to be protected from malicious appropriation when resources were digitised and presented online. We identified a challenge and opportunity to explore how ICT might support rich connections to both the archive and the experts that work with its content, to help safeguard the KGM message and the materials being presented.

KGM’s sustainability to no small extent rests on how it **engages with international tourists**, who support it via charitable donations and the purchase of value-added services (e.g. audio tour guides and refreshments). Much of the current tourist activity helps to **support a KGM social programme** that finds work for, and otherwise funds, genocide survivors (who often still have significantly impaired lives). An ongoing challenge is for staff of the KGM social enterprise unit to find new opportunities for developing value added services that generate income whilst being positioned sensitively in the context of memorialisation and not-for-profit endeavours. Staff expressed significant interest in the potential for judicious use of ICT to interact, both remotely and locally, with international tourists and engage them with the centre’s resources. Importantly, this includes offering sensible avenues through which these tourists would be able to meaningfully engage with beneficiaries of the social programme.

## 4. SUMMARY

Our developing understanding of the context in which KGM operates highlights the significant challenges and opportunities raised by cultural institutions endeavouring to deliver services by engaging in both local and global digital economies.

## 5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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