

Rwandan Radio: Incitement to Genocide

David Walega, December 2005

Introduction

The International Criminal tribunal for Rwanda in Arusha, Tanzania, at the conclusion of a three year trial, convicted three prominent members of the Rwandan media for their role in the 1994 Genocide of over 800,000 Rwandan Tutsis and Hutu moderates. Not since the Nuremberg trials of 1945 has an international tribunal found members of the media guilty of genocide, incitement to commit genocide and crimes against humanity. Allan Sigg, head of external relations at a United Nations tribunal investigating Rwanda's genocide, stated that international law dictates that journalist who incite killings are guilty" For these journalists, it won't be enough to say: 'Sorry I was just a small fish and I had orders.' The standards of international law should be the same here in Rwanda."¹

Ferdinand Hahimana, the former director of the Rwandan National Information Office and founding member of the radio station, Radio Television Libre des Milles Collines (RTLM), was sentenced to life in prison. Hahimana was a key ideologue among Hutu extremists and a co-founder of the extremist CDR political party. Hassan Ngeze, owner and editor of the Hutu extremist newspaper, Kangura, was also sentenced to life in prison. Jean- Bosco Barayagwiza, a co-

¹ Christine L. Kellow and Leslie Steeves," Radio Programming and Genocide" *Journal of Communication*, vol. 48, Iss. 3 (1998)

founder of the RTLM and the public affairs director in Rwanda's Foreign Affairs Ministry, was sentenced to 35 years in prison.

RTLM, which was established in April 1993, incited the Hutu population to search out and exterminate all Tutsi and moderate Hutu civilians. "RTLM broadcasts was a drumbeat calling on listeners to take action against Tutsi," Judge Pillay said. "RTLM spread petrol throughout the country little by little, so that one day it would be bale to set fire to the whole country."² With racist dialogue and ethnically divisive political propaganda key figures in the government and private enterprise orchestrated the most efficient campaign of ethnic cleansing since the Holocaust. "You have missed some of the enemies. You must go back there and finish them off. The graves are not yet full!" RTLM, Kigali, Rwanda, 1994.³ Expressions of intolerance filled the airwaves the years preceding the genocide accelerating ethnic hatred toward the Tutsi. The Tutsi were commonly referred to as *inyenzi* or cockroaches, in effect dehumanizing 18% of the population.

The genocide began on the evening of April 6th 1994 after the assassination of the Rwandan and Burundian presidents. While returning from Arusha, Tanzania where they took part in negotiating the Peace Accords with the rebel group the RPF, the presidents plane exploded killing all onboard. The downing of the presidents plane moments from the Kigali airport was the signal to extremist throughout the country to begin a hundred day systematic

² Reuters. "Three guilty of genocide in Rwanda media trial"

www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/africa/12/03/rawanda.reut (accessed Feb.2005)

³ Bill Berkely, *The graves are not yet full, race, tribe and powering the heart of Africa* (New York: Basic Books, 2001)

extermination. The killing was executed by civilians carrying machetes, homemade clubs and boards inlaid with nails.

History of radio in Africa: A system of specialization

The Rwandan government throughout the 1990s established an ethnic and regional balance through the practice of ethnic discrimination. This system of specialization, favoring one group over the other set up a dynamic of power to keep the Tutsi population in control and maintain a level of suspicion in the Hutu majority.

Through media control and the lack of independent radio voices in Rwanda, a small number of individuals were able to order and project a distorted cultural worldview upon the entire population. In this tiny populated country, which has a tradition of blind obedience, the orders from officials over the radio met little resistance. The radio was essentially the voice of the government with each news bulletin beginning with a speech by then President Habyarimana. “The radio’s journalists were considered like civil servants. Radio Rwanda had a very formal style. All what it said was considered the truth. The radio-station was the government’s voice: nobody contested its authority.”⁴

The narrative techniques employed by these radio stations focused on a technique of “risk & danger flow” and “kill or be killed” warning the audience of general and specific threats. The propaganda emphasized the gruesome consequences of violence for the victims. “ Hutus were told repeatedly that the

⁴ Alison des Forges, *Leave none to tell the story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999)

Tutsis were killing Hutus in large numbers, and that Hutus, therefore, must kill all Tutsis.” Leslie Steeves continues: “The propaganda was meant to enrage and embolden the population to strike out in a movement of perceived self preservation.”⁵

Media dependency

Why was the radio so efficient in inciting an entire population to take up arms? Rwanda is one of the most densely populated countries in Sub Saharan Africa. A once plentiful country of natural resources and plantations had suffered severe drought and the hardship of several politically instigated ethnic conflicts. “Rwanda experienced six famines during this century. Pressures of this magnitude leave people more dissatisfied, often desperate and vulnerable to manipulation.”⁶ These events have left the country in economic despair and the population in a permanent state of crowded instability.

This constant state of insecurity combined with a widely illiterate population created a reliance on the radio for any information or guidance. Rwandan history is one of an oral tradition of sharing and disseminating information. Group listening is common as one radio per thirteen people (1994) is the only source of communication outside of the urban areas. The government distributed thousands of radios in which to distribute its message to every corner of the country during the early 1990s. Listening in large groups help establish the dynamics for collaboration of thoughts and emotions helping to further incite

⁵ Christine L. Kellow and Leslie Steeves, “Radio Programming and Genocide” *Journal of Communication*, vol. 48, Iss. 3 (1998)

⁶ Christine L. Kellow and Leslie Steeves, “Radio Programming and Genocide” *Journal of Communication*, vol. 48, Iss. 3 (1998)

group violence. Leslie Steeves in her report on Rwanda and the media suggests this dependence theory and collective reaction effect: " In times of instability people may be more reliant on mass media for information and guidance; people may know of the crucial events only through media; and media are more influential in matters outside the realm of personal experience."-McQuail (1994)

Four years of psychological preparation lead up to the genocide. Several words was integrated into the broadcasts to suggest extermination. Over the years these thinly veiled code words became ingrained in the listeners understanding. "Work" was a word used to mean kill. "This terminology resonated with the culture by referring to the theme of communal work. For instance the word interahamwe, which means communal work parties, was used in many broadcasts to incite communal killing."⁷ The interahamwe were the civilian militias that armed the roadblocks and roamed the countryside in groups killing en masse.

End result of campaigns

In the last decade there are several examples of the media using its power to inflame grievances and accelerate the inclination toward violence. In Serbia, television was manipulated to stir up ethnic tensions prior to the civil war. In Rwanda the radio and newspaper were the motivational sources of inspiration and information to incite an entire society to genocide. In the former Soviet republic of Georgia land disputes were exacerbated by the nationalists mythology

⁷ Christine L. Kellow and Leslie Steeves," Radio Programming and Genocide" *Journal of Communication*, vol. 48, Iss. 3 (1998)

propagandized in the media.⁸ The genocide was particularly effective in raising participation amongst the masses because of the coordination of propaganda between the media and governmental officials with a consistent message of intolerance. In a note found in the Butare province, the author outlines a system of “lies, exaggeration, ridicule, and innuendo to attack the opponent, in both his public and private life.”⁹ The propagandists magnified the hatred and insecurity of the president and his officials and exploited the media to its full potential.

The three defendants were found guilty by the tribunal in December 2003. The charges were direct and public incitement to genocide, conspiracy and crimes against humanity more exacting persecution, murder and extermination. Under the charge of genocide the tribunal stated:

” The chamber has found that RTLM broadcasts engaged in ethnic stereotyping in a manner that promoted contempt and hatred for the Tutsi population and called its listeners to seek out and take up arms.” “The nature of radio transmission made RTLM particularly dangerous and harmful, as did the breadth of its reach. Unlike print media, radio is immediately present and active. The power of the human voice, heard by the chamber when the broadcast tapes were played in Kinyawanda, add a quality and dimension beyond language to the message conveyed. Radio heightened the sense of fear, the sense of danger and the sense of

⁸ United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Use and Abuse of Media in Vulnerable Societies, www.Internews.org, 2003 (accessed March 2, 2005)

⁹ Alison des Forges, *Leave none to tell the story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999)

urgency giving rise to the need for actions by listeners.” Section 99, Case No. ICTR-99-52-T¹⁰

The unlimited reach of the radio was of particular importance to their findings as it was the medium of communication with the widest reach.

“Without a firearm, machete or any physical weapon, you caused the deaths of thousands of civilians.” ¹¹

Freedom of expression in Rwanda

Little has seemed to change in Rwanda since these historic rulings. Paul Kagame was elected in the first countrywide election since 1994. The emergence of a new free press was not to be found under this new administration. The presidents’ first measure was to revive the information ministry that had been closed several years earlier. ¹² The state owned radio and television station have managed to keep their monopoly. Government authorities are constantly targeting the independent and often critical of the government newspapers

The freedom of the Press laws drafted in 1991 coincided with the legalization of opposition parties. This is often referred to as “ the Rwandan media’s golden age” despite the lack of any obvious influence of opposition voices to the tightly controlled government media machine. During this time there was an increase of private media making it necessary for the government to form a National Commission on the Press which could revoke or warn a journalist for

¹⁰ ICTR, Prosecutor V. Ferdinand Nahimana, Jean Bosco Barayagwiza, and Hassan Ngeze, December 3, 2003

¹¹ ICTR, Prosecutor V. Ferdinand Nahimana, Jean Bosco Barayagwiza, and Hassan Ngeze, December 3, 2003

¹² Reporters Without Borders, Rwanda- 2004 Annual Report, www.rsf.org (accessed Feb. 5, 2005)

"failure to observe press laws." The Government, issuing its only license to the now infamous RTLM radio station, regulated the licensing of all radio stations. Backed with the full support of the government and pro Hutu extremist factions the radio station was unopposed leading up to the genocide. Because of its popularity, RTLM had a direct effect on the only other radio station with any reach, Radio Rwanda, which was forced to change its message to compete for an audience.

After 1994, the objective of the new government was reconciliation and to unify its people. The private media sector was forced to practice a sense of self-censorship in order to evade the scrutiny and repression of the government. Any mention of ethnicity, support for disenfranchised groups or mention of civil unrest was means for arrest. Most professional journalists have been sent into exile, arrested or put out of business. As a result most of Rwanda's population is still uninformed. The platform for open public debate is nonexistent with no venue for open conversation.¹³ Before the genocide there existed no independent media institution to counteract the messages supported by the politically motivated groups and today exists much the same situation.

Significance of the tribunals

The rulings of the Tribunal have been the subject of much debate amongst those human rights activist concerned with the legal precedents. Accused of making the judgment too overbroad, many are concerned that this will give other countries the excuse to repress, edit and monitor closely the media. In countries

¹³ Alison des Forges, *Leave none to tell the story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999)

such as China, the media is closely scrutinized and journalists operate within strict boundaries. “(T)hese examples demonstrate the extent to which repressive countries use hate speech and antidiscrimination laws to suppress legitimate dissent and criticism. China, for example, is the world's leading jailer of journalists, with 39 behind bars, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Some repressive countries could be emboldened by the language of the tribunal's decision.”¹⁴ The tribunal reinforced in its ruling that countries were correct in suppressing freedom of speech when the nations security was at risk. Any speech that promotes “national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence”.¹⁵ The United States has moved toward this direction with the Patriot Act. Judgments like this, by using overly broad restrictions on speech, give further justification for the creation of such laws worldwide.

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¹⁴ Joel Simon, “Murder by Media: Why the Rwanda genocide tribunal went too far.” *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 2003

¹⁵ Joel Simon, “Murder by Media: Why the Rwanda genocide tribunal went too far.” *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 2003

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