

Where Radio is King: Rwanda's Hate Radio and the Lessons Learned

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In a country where "...radio has become like the voice of God..."¹[\[1\]](#), it should come as no surprise that the media, and in particular, the radio, played a central role in an ethnic conflict as bloody as any known in recent history. The blame for the Rwandan genocide of 1994, in which between 800,000 and 1,000,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were massacred in 100 days,[\[2\]](#) has been laid on the doorsteps of many. There is no denying the guilt of those who organized and carried out the genocide, many of whom are awaiting trial by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in Arusha, Tanzania, and those who took part in murdering their neighbours, who will be tried by the traditional village justice system of gacaca.[\[3\]](#)

However, it is clear that some degree of responsibility lies firmly with the Rwandan media, particularly the extremist Hutu-supported Radio-Télévision Libre des Milles Collines (RTLM), which led the steady stream of hate propaganda that encouraged ethnic tension and incited an already tense population to massacre hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians. In order to evaluate the role of radio in the Rwanda conflict, I will first analyze the roots of RTLM and its actions prior to April 6, 1994, which marks the beginning to the genocide, and then provide a discussion of RTLM's propaganda and hate broadcasting during the approximately 100 day period of the genocide. I will also examine the refusal

on the part of the US administration to jam RTLM's broadcasts, and the possible implications of this failure to intervene on subsequent African conflicts, including those in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Finally, I will look at the possibility of a universal framework to be used by the international community to determine the point at which freedom of the press evolves into crimes against humanity.

"The Rwandan people spend all their time with a receiver stuck to their ear."[\[4\]](#)

In the Rwanda of the early 1990s, as in most African nations, radio was the primary means of disseminating information to the public.

Listening to radio broadcasts was a part of daily life in a way that most contemporary Westerners cannot fully comprehend; radio was so prevalent that in the years immediately leading up to the genocide, there was a ratio of one radio per thirteen people.[\[5\]](#)

Capitalizing on the popularity of radio, RTLM was the creation of Ferdinand Nahimana, Jean-Bosco Barayagwiza, and other extremists of the Hutu Power faction as a means of creating a voice for members of the Mouvement Revolutionnaire National pour le Developpement (MRND). This move came after the moderate opposition parties gained power within

the Ministry of Information, which controlled the government-sponsored Radio Rwanda.[6] The station was founded with fifty shareholders, many of them members of the Akazu, a group of Hutu extremists who acted as an entourage to President Habyarimana and his wife, as well as members of the MRND and Coalition pour la Défense de la République (CDR).[7] Each of these shareholders is known to have played “a significant role in the genocide.”[8] RTLM was the only nominally private radio station founded in Rwanda, aside from the Rwandan Patriotic Front’s (RPF) Radio Muhabura, “[a]lthough several applications for private radio stations were made around the same period.”[9] Having begun broadcasting on July 8, 1993,[10] RTLM adopted “a western-style talk radio format”[11] that quickly gained popularity, particularly among the youth being targeted by the MRND and CDR for membership in the militias:

RTLM whipped up fear and ethnic hatred... using dynamic, innovative programming which introduced to Rwanda’s airways for the first time a unique cocktail of the liveliest African music and informal talk radio, blended with culturally-coded attacks on Tutsi and their defenders.[12]

All but one of RTLM’s eight journalists had extensive media experience, many with anti-Tutsi news publications, and all were well accustomed to the ethnic denigration for which RTLM was to become known. It has been claimed that Georges Ruggiu, a Belgian-Italian without journalism experience, was hired by the station’s founders in order to lend the idea of Western support for the station.[13] Long commentaries on the Inyenzi and the Inkotanyi (terms used to refer to Tutsi and the RPF) filled hours on

the airwaves, along with the music of Hutu Power singers such as Simon Bikindi, whose popular song “I Hate These Hutus” was played regularly.[14] As well, RTLM frequently broadcast readings of the “Hutu Ten Commandments,” originally printed in the virulently anti-Tutsi newspaper, Kangura, in 1990.[15] These commandments included a range of instructions on how Hutu should behave toward Tutsi, and decreed, “[t]he Bahutu should stop having mercy on the Batutsi.”[16]

However, in spite of the ethnic propaganda that RTLM broadcast in the months prior to the genocide, it should be noted that there is a “distinction between what was broadcast before April 6, 1994 and what was broadcast after.”[17] While early broadcasts did contain propaganda and ethnic slurs, and “may... have helped to create a popular mood more favourable to genocide,”[18] the tone of RTLM underwent a significant shift on the night of April 6 from a station so ridiculous that it was “hard to take seriously”[19] to something far more sinister.

“Kill! Kill! There aren’t any bodies in the streets yet.”[20]

After the death of Habyarimana, “it would be an understatement to accuse RTLM of incitement.”[21] Just before the plane crash, on April 3, 1994, RTLM had predicted that “there [would] be a little something here in Kigali”[22] in the following days; this was merely the beginning of RTLM’s “political weather forecast.”[23] It soon became clear that RTLM was deeply involved in the plans for genocide, as the station demonstrated a flair for organizing and encouraging Rwandan civilians to “[f]ight [the Inyenzi] with the weapons at [their]

disposal” and calling the Hutu to “[t]ake up [their] traditional ‘tools’”[24] in a “final war”[25] against the Tutsi population. The deadly broadcasts that began immediately following reports of Habyarimana’s death “meant that RTLM had known for a while what was coming and was a key player”[26] in the genocide.

“To the outsider’s eye, RTLM’s transcripts reveal few explicit instructions to murder”[27] as RTLM used a cultural code in its transmissions. Tutsi were referred to as “inyenzi” (cockroaches) and snakes; dehumanization of a group is a common propaganda tool used to stress otherness.[28] Allusions were repeatedly made to historical events concerning the Hutu-Tutsi tension, such as the apparent jealousy of the Tutsi over 1959 Social Revolution when the Hutu majority gained power, as well as recent examples of “Hutu traitors,” as those pushing for the peace accords signed in Arusha in 1993 were known.[29] RTLM increased its playing of Bikindi’s “violence-provoking songs”[30] to as many as fifteen to twenty times a day at the peak of the station’s broadcasting.[31] Accompanying the anti-Tutsi music were diatribes and exhortations about the evil and cruel nature of the inkotanyi-inyenzi, the desire of the Tutsi to eliminate the Hutu majority, and the need for Hutu to “defend the integrity of [the] country”[32] from Tutsi influence. Hutu citizens were repeatedly called on to do umuganda, a traditional form of communal labour; “likening extermination to... efforts in which everyone had to pitch in,”[33] RTLM regularly told its listeners to ‘go to work.’ And in Rwanda at the time, this euphemism and many others were clearly recognized as a call to kill the

Tutsi.[34] For these euphemisms to take on such meanings- to make roadblock duty, search patrols, and killing acceptable activities for people to take part in-RTLM appropriated three ideas that had shaped postcolonial Rwanda’s understanding of itself: History, Democracy, and Development... RTLM invoked History, Democracy, and Development to mobilize people rather than to render them docile, using these familiar ideas to mask unthinkable ends.[35]

RTLM explicitly incited violence in the midst of the codes and euphemisms. “The station did not [merely] try to persuade people towards genocide; it organised them to carry it out.”[36] From April 7 on, RTLM journalists used the lists compiled by the interahamwe and impuzamugambi militias to call out the Tutsi around Kigali (and later, as their broadcasting range expanded, other districts). Names, locations and license plate numbers were regularly read out on the air, targeting key Tutsi and Hutu, particularly those politically involved in the transitional coalition government.[37] Many such broadcasts were directed to the militiamen manning “each roadblock [where] portable radios blasted the music and exhortations of RTLM”[38] so that any Tutsi trying to escape would be captured and promptly exterminated, as those fleeing were targeted by RTLM as traitors and RPF accomplices.[39] A well-documented example, popularized in the film *Hotel Rwanda*, involved RTLM broadcasting the names of sixty-two evacuees on a convoy authorized by the interim government; both vehicles were stopped at roadblocks after the radio directed the militia to attack.[40] As several survivors have said, listening to RTLM was the most accurate method of

determining if one was being targeted by the militias.^[41]

Another tactic of RTLM was to publicize the names and locations of purported RPF accomplices and others who posed risks to security.^[42] Valerie Bemeriki, one of RTLM's journalists, had a particular fondness for reading out lists of names, addresses, workplaces and leisure activities of those she referred to as "responsables du FPR,"^[43] calling on groups of Hutu to locate and kill the individuals named.^[44] "[I]ndividuals who were denounced by RTLM were eventually killed within several days of the broadcast."^[45] In the early days of the genocide, a large number of Tutsi and moderate Hutu fled their homes and gathered together in "churches, schools, hospitals, and government offices that had offered refuge in the past."^[46] On several occasions, RTLM announcers broadcast the locations of such safe havens and refuges, alerting local militia groups to attack with lists and machetes in hand. All through the large-scale massacres, "[t]he station broadcast death tolls as if they were traffic reports."^[47]

Throughout the genocide, RTLM organized their broadcasts in a "kill or be killed" frame,^[48] using a propaganda style known as "accusations in the mirror."^[49] The station frequently used examples of what the militia and army were doing to Tutsi, turning the situations around and broadcasting the violence as actions of the RPF. The station also described the RPF as bloodthirsty, cruel, and without mercy on their victims. These allegations coincided with the steady stream of misinformation and exaggeration (although not without some grains of truth) that Rwandan civilians had been hearing about the rebels for the previous four years. By creating a culture of fear for the Hutu, RTLM made it clear that the only chance

of survival lay in "wag[ing] a war without mercy"^[50] against the enemy, which, in the political and social climate of 1994 Rwanda, was understood clearly to be Tutsi.

"...Radios don't kill people. People kill people."^[51]

Amid numerous allegations of disinterest in Rwanda and failure to intervene in the genocide, the international community, particularly the United States, is thought to bear the responsibility for "a particularly blatant instance of dereliction of duty... [for] the failure to jam the hate broadcasts of the elusive Radio Mille Collines."^[52] It has been asserted by many, including Lieutenant General (ret.) Romeo Dallaire, who served as Force Commander to the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR I), that jamming RTLM's broadcasts might have limited or altogether averted the genocide.^[53] Dallaire brought the issue directly to the UN, arguing that "RTLM had to be shut down, as it was a direct instrument in promoting genocide."^[54] As the UN was not capable of shutting down the station on its own, the matter was brought to the United States, "[t]he country best equipped to prevent the genocide planners from broadcasting directly to the population."^[55] The US had the ability to destroy the transmitter used in the broadcasts, to produce counter-broadcasts promoting peace and cooperation, and most importantly, to jam RTLM's broadcasts.^[56]

According to Metz, "[t]here are three main reasons why the United States Government chose not to jam Rwandese radio broadcasts, as it very clearly had the power to do."^[57] First, after the failed mission in Somalia, in which

eighteen US Marines were killed, public opinion did not favour “intervention in obscure African countries...”[58] Even “soft intervention”[59] was discouraged, despite clear demonstrations that the conflict in Rwanda was indeed genocide (a fact which the US routinely denied until May 21, 1994).[60] Furthermore, there were issues of cost and practicality, both deemed problematic by US officials. After April 16 and 17, when the RPF destroyed

RTLM’s transmitter,[61] RTLM “turned into a lower-frequency mobile unit”[62] making it increasingly difficult, though not impossible, to jam the broadcasts. The technique of “radio jamming fills the airwaves by placing either a disrupting signal (causing just noise or ‘fuzz’) or an overriding signal (a different broadcast) into a specific frequency on the electromagnetic spectrum.”[63] Jamming the station required the use of the US Air Force’s Commando Solo,[64] which would need flight clearance from Rwanda’s neighbouring countries, as well as a “semi-secure area of operations”[65] in which to perform its duties. In order to jam the broadcasts, the plane would have been forced to wait in Rwandan airspace until broadcasts began, leaving the aircraft (and thus, US servicemen) highly vulnerable to attack. As for finances, it would cost the US government roughly \$8,500 per hour to operate.[66] “The Pentagon judged that the lives of the estimated 8,000-10,000 Rwandans being killed each day in the genocide were not worth the cost of the fuel or the violation of Rwandan airwaves.”[67]

The key to understanding the US refusal to jam RTLM’s broadcasts lies with knowledge of US policy on international law concerning radio. During the Cold War, facing a Soviet Union with no issues when it came to

oppressing dissent through jamming, the US developed a “blanket rejection to jamming... outside the military arena.”[68] In Rwanda, the US interpretation of the “incitement to commit genocide” clause in Article III of the Genocide Convention and the issue of state sovereignty were at the heart of the decision not to jam RTLM. According to US Defense attorneys, “international law required the U.S. government to respect the sovereignty of the Rwandese Government by not jamming”[69] as “[b]and width within a nation is owned by the nation, and jamming a national radio station would violate international convention on national sovereignty.”[70] The US administration felt that intervention in RTLM’s broadcasts must be left to the Rwandan government, despite the interim government’s involvement in and encouragement of the broadcasts and the genocide. Other, perhaps more realistic interpretations of international law clarify “that after 6 April foreign governments not only had the right to intervene to jam RTLM broadcasts, they had an obligation to do so if they were able, under the Genocide Convention.”[71] In the end, it comes down to which international body of law one respects -that which governs state sovereignty, or that which governs human rights.

Naturally, there are those who defend the US refusal to jam RTLM, from moral and practical perspectives. Some dismiss claims that jamming RTLM would have solved anything, “because radio broadcasts were not essential to perpetuating or directing the killings...[and] the extremists possessed and used other means to foster hatred.”[72] It has also been noted, perhaps correctly, that shutting down the station would have had little effect, as

“[t]he temporary silencing of RTLM [by RPF’s destruction of their transmitter] failed to inhibit the genocide in any way... [and] did not prevent the genocide from spreading.”^[73] Others, critical of the US decision, agree that radio jamming was not the best or most effective option available,^[74] but also note that it was never given any real consideration as a viable intervention by American officials, and thus was “merely [a] palliative aimed at soothing guilty consciences.”^[75]

Learning from Rwanda

In the wake of the Rwandan crisis, it is clear a closer eye must be kept on media in areas with extreme ethnic tension; indeed, the mistakes made in Rwanda spell out a clear, step-by-step account of what not to do. Yet, aside from a handful of human rights activists and media monitoring organizations, the international community has stood back and listened as exhortations of violence came over the airwaves all over Africa – those in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo were practically echoes of RTLM. In the last months of the genocide in Rwanda, Burundians could hear Radio Rutomorangingo (translated, it means “the radio that tells the truth”),^[76] which was reported to have connections to RTLM. Unlike in Rwanda, the Burundian Prime Minister and President both called on the UN in 1995 to assist in terminating the broadcasts, which was ruled as an impossibility for the mission in Burundi at the time. The station’s “inflammatory radio broadcasts were widely judged to have contributed to violence in Burundi in 1995-96, as they did in Rwanda in 1994, but the [UN] Secretary-General decided against intervention primarily out of concern for the safety of UN personnel.”^[77]

Only a few years after Rwanda, the airwaves in the Democratic Republic of

the Congo blasted words that, to those who heard them, sounded eerily like RTLM’s calls for bloodshed in neighbouring Rwanda. In the midst of ethnic conflict in 1998, the government-sponsored station, Radio-Télévision Nationale Congolaise (RTNC), openly called for violence against Tutsi:

[I]t should be stressed that people must bring a machete, a spear, an arrow, a hoe, spades, rakes, nails, truncheons... barbed wire, stones... and the like, in order, dear listeners, to kill the Rwandan Tutsis... Wherever you see a Rwandan Tutsi, regard him as your enemy.^[78]

Despite the obvious similarities to RTLM, Rwanda’s lessons were either too fresh in the minds of decision-makers, or too far back in distant memory. RTNC and other Congolese hate radio stations, including Radio Liberté and Voix du Patriote, were largely ignored outside the Great Lakes region. Radio Liberté was first monitored in March of 2000, broadcasting diatribes similar to those heard on RTNC and RTLM. Voix du Patriote, also believed to have links to RTLM, was monitored broadcasting on and off from 1997 to 2000, and was heard “urg[ing] ‘the Bantu brothers’ to ‘rise as one’ to combat the Tutsi.”^[79] Hate radio stations have continued broadcasting in the Congo. Beyond UN warnings^[80] and a rapid reaction force deployed to one area of the country in 2003, little was done to shut down broadcasts that, like in Rwanda, fuelled ethnic conflict and killing.

Nearly thirteen years after Rwanda, the international community still lacks a cohesive and comprehensive agreement on what constitutes incitement, the legality of radio jamming in the international, non-military scene, and when to intervene. These issues must be considered carefully in order to formulate a practical international

framework for radio jamming, as it has become clear in the past decade that the current stance has allowed for the deaths of over one million civilians caught in the crossfire of hate media. Those who disagree with radio jamming tend to do so on the basis of respecting state sovereignty, but issues of sovereignty must be considered secondary to issues of human rights abuses, particularly in the face of genocide. Jamie Metzl, a former UN Human Rights Officer, has proposed “[a] revised understanding of the international law of radio jamming [that] can provide a legal framework for policies designed... to prevent and respond to mass human rights violations.”^[81] This new framework would allow for intervention under UN Chapter VII missions, which have expanded to allow for intervention with the use of force to protect human rights, although a more concrete and unified definition of “incitement” as noted by the Genocide Convention will be necessary. As Metzl admits

Jamming might seem on its face to violate elements of international radio law defined in the narrowest Cold War terms [which the US abided by strictly in 1994], [but] jamming seems particularly appropriate in... a limited range of cases in light of the international depoliticization of the incitement provision, human rights treaty obligations, particularly the Genocide Convention, and post-Cold War human rights sensibilities.^[82]

Metzl’s real argument, however, is not merely for the allowance of jamming in certain circumstances, but for the establishment of an information intervention unit that would have the ability to monitor media, provide peace broadcasts to disseminate unbiased, reliable news and, when sanctioned by the UN Security Council, to intervene by

jamming hate media.⁸³ Metzl believes that “the proposed unit could have a major impact in many of the growing number of situations where media activities incite mass violence.”⁸⁴ The efficacy of such a force remains to be determined and many have their concerns about the potential for censorship, but the existence of a unit responsible for monitoring media in areas where “realization [of ethnic violence] appears imminent”⁸⁵ ensures that, unlike in Rwanda, someone with the ability to act will be listening.

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Endnotes

[1] Mary Kimani, as quoted in Dina Temple-Raston, "Journalism and genocide," *Columbia Journalism Review* 41 no. 3 (2002):18.

[2] The death tolls for the genocide vary widely depending on sources; estimates are as low as 500,000 while those at the upper level top one million. It is generally accepted that at least 800,000 people were killed. While the majority of my sources reference the standard death toll, I have

encountered a broad range within my source material.

[3] For an excellent overview of the system of gacaca, see Inkiko Gacaca, available online at <http://www.inkikogacaca.gov.rw/> and George Packer, "Justice on a Hill," in *The New Killing Fields: Massacre and the Politics of Intervention*, eds Nicolaus Mills and Kira Brunner, 129-153. (

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[4] Christine L. Kellows and H. Leslie Steeves, "The role of radio in the Rwandan genocide," *Journal of Communication* 48 no.3 (1998): 118.

[5] Hege L Gulseth, "The Use of Propaganda in the Rwandan Genocide: A Study of Radio-Television Libre des Milles Collines (RTL), University of Oslo Student Thesis, May 2004, <http://www.digbib.uio.no/publ/statsvitenskap/2004/19095/19095.pdf>; Kellow and Steeves, "The role of radio."

[6] Jamie Frederic Metzl, "Rwandan Genocide and the international law of radio jamming," *The American Journal of International Law* 91 no. 4 (1997).

[7] Linda Kirschke, *Broadcasting Genocide: Censorship, propaganda & state-sponsored violence in Rwanda 1990-1994* (London: Article 19, 1996).; L.R Melvern, *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide* (London: Zed Books, 2000).; Gulseth, "The Use of Propaganda."

[8] Melvern, *A People Betrayed*, 71.

[9] Kirschke, *Broadcasting Genocide*, 47.

[10] Ibid, 41.

[11] Internews, "Case Study: Rwanda," *Media in Conflict*, Internews, 2006 http://www.internews.org/pubs/mediainconflict/mic_rwanda.shtm (accessed September 17th, 2006).

[12] Frank Chalk, "Radio Propaganda and Genocide," Conference on Synergy in Early Warning, Centre for Refugee Studies, York University, Toronto, 1997.

[13] Darryl Li, "Echoes of Violence," in *The New Killing Fields: Massacre and the Politics of Intervention*, eds Nicolaus Mills and Kira Brunner, 117-128. (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

[14] Philip Gourevitch, *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: Stories from Rwanda*, 100

(New York: Picador, 1998). Gourevitch has included a portion of the lyrics as a demonstration of the message it promoted.

[15] Temple-Raston, "Journalism and genocide."

[16] Samantha Powers, "Rwanda: 'Mostly in a Listening Mode,'" in *A Problem From Hell*, 329-389 (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

[17] Richard Carver, "Broadcasting & Political Transition: Rwanda & Beyond," in *African Broadcast Cultures: Radio in Transition*, eds Richard Fardon and Graham Furniss, 190.

(Oxford: James Currey Publishers, 2000).

[18] Richard Carver, "Neutralising the Voices of Hate: Broadcasting and Genocide," in *African Voices on Development and Social Justice: Editorials from Pambazuka News 2004*, eds Firoze Manji and Patrick Burnett, 71. (Dar es

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[19] Canadian Ambassador, Lucie Edwards, as quoted by Radio Netherlands, "Hate Radio: Rwanda," Counteracting Hate Radio Dossier, 2004, <http://www.radionetherlands.nl/>

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[20] Valerie Bemeriki, as quoted by Li, "Echoes of Violence," 121.

[21] Carver, "Neutralising the Voices of Hate," 70.

[22] RTLM broadcast on April 3, 1994, as quoted by Gourevitch, *We wish to inform you*, 110.

[23] Ibid, 110.

[24] RTLM transcript, translated into English, as quoted by Kirschke, *Broadcasting Genocide*, 70.

[25] RTLM broadcast on June 17, 1994, Ibid, 66.

[26] L.Gen. (ret.) Romeo Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil: the Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2003), 272.

[27] Li, "Echoes of Violence," 120.

[28] Gulseth, "The Use of Propaganda."

[29] Kellow & Steeves, "The Role of Radio in the Rwandan Genocide."

[30] Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil*, 261.

[31] Kirschke, *Broadcasting Genocide*, 90.

[32] RTLM transcript, as quoted in Kirschke, *Broadcasting Genocide*, 84.

[33] Li, "Echoes of Violence," 121.

[34] Gulseth, "The Use of Propaganda;" Temple-Raston, "Journalism and genocide."

[35] Li, "Echoes of Violence," 120.

[36] Carver, "Neutralising the Voices of Hate," 70.

[37] Kellow and Steeves, "The Role of Radio in the Rwandan Genocide;" Gulseth, "The Use of Propaganda;" Dallaire, *Shake Hands With the Devil*; Kirschke, *Broadcasting Genocide*.

[38] Dallaire, *Shake Hands With the Devil*, 277.

[39] Kirschke, *Broadcasting Genocide*.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid; Power, A Problem From Hell.

[42] Alison Des Forges, Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda, Human Rights Watch, 1999, <http://129.194.252.80/catfiles/1317.pdf>; Kirschke, Broadcasting Genocide.

[43] Meaning "RPF accomplices," quoted in Des Forges, Leave None to Tell the Story.

[44] Ibid, 159.

[45] Kirschke, Broadcasting Genocide, 75.

[46] Des Forges, Leave None to Tell the Story, 160.

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