

The Role of Language in the Media During the 1994 Rwandan Genocide

Carlyn Jorgensen
South Texas College

In 1994, around 800,000 people were killed in 100 days of genocide in Rwanda. The primary targets of the genocide were the minority Tutsi, but many moderate Hutus were killed as well. In order to facilitate mass participation in the genocide, the ruling elite created and promoted media tools to disseminate anti-Tutsi propaganda and convince ordinary Rwandans to take part in the killings. The media instruments used included the RTLM radio station and newspapers such as Kangura. Using excerpts from radio broadcasts, as well as scholarly works by journalists, broadcasters, and media experts, this paper explores the role of the media in the genocide, including the formation of the media outlets and the various types of language used in the media, (such as high context and low context language), in addition to explaining how this language was used to promote genocide, and making recommendations for the prevention of the use of hate media in future conflicts.

Keywords: genocide, language, Rwanda, RTLM

INTRODUCTION

In 1994, between 800,000 and 1 million people were killed in 100 days of genocide in Rwanda. The primary targets of the genocide were the minority Tutsi, but many moderate Hutus were killed as well. In order to facilitate mass participation in the genocide, the ruling elite created and promoted media tools to disseminate anti-Tutsi propaganda and convince ordinary Rwandans to take part in the killings. The media instruments used included the RTLM radio station and newspapers such as *Kangura*. This paper will explore the role of the media in the genocide, including the formation of the media outlets, the various types of language used in the media, how this language was used to promote genocide, and if the prevention of hate media is possible.

Because a majority of Rwandans could not read or write, the government relied on radio stations to broadcast information to the public. Radio Rwanda was the only radio station the government allowed to relay government information, but Rwandans found the station dull and tedious in its presentation of information. Radio-Television Libre de Milles Collines (RTLM) was a radical departure from Radio Rwanda. Founded by Félicien Kabuga, a wealthy businessman, RTLM was informal, lively, humorous, and did not blindly support what government officials said. RTLM would allow people to call in requests and exchange gossip with the announcers, while RTLM personalities went to the streets to hear what ordinary Rwandans had to say about the topics of the day.¹ Due to its irreverent tone and encouragement of average Rwandans to speak their minds about events in Rwanda, RTLM quickly became a popular radio station, which helped facilitate its ability to circulate anti-Tutsi propaganda.

The other major news source in Rwanda was the daily newspapers. The newspapers tended to support one of four groups: the Rwanda government, political opposition parties, RPF newspapers, and the Tutsi diaspora.² The number of readers a newspaper had depended on its political leanings, as well as its financial supporters. It was very difficult for opposition newspapers to be distributed, as the government attempted to block their publication. Anyone who wanted to launch a newspaper had to write a letter to the minister of information and the local prosecutor informing them of their intentions to print a newspaper and provide a name, goals, and the identity of the editorial board. Opposition editors were frequently interrogated, beaten, and imprisoned.³ Newspapers on all ends of the political spectrum used dehumanizing language such as calling political leaders dogs, cows, goats, hyenas, lions, monkeys, pigs, snakes, and, of course, cockroaches. Calling someone a hyena was highly insulting, as the name hyena is used to label a dirty person and wish them dead; calling a person or group of people cockroach was akin to sentencing someone to death.⁴

While all the newspapers used dehumanizing language, the worst was the pro-government publication *Kangura*. *Kangura* was established in 1990 by Hassan Ngeze and was famous for publishing the Hutu “Ten Commandments”, which called on Hutus to understand that the Tutsi were their enemy and that they should break all ties with them.⁵ *Kangura* repeatedly scapegoated the Tutsi, claiming they controlled business, dominated the education sector and churches, and grabbed all privileges. *Kangura* also accused Tutsis of wanting to return Rwanda to the colonial days, and reminded Hutus of what life was like under Belgian colonial rule.⁶ More of the role of *Kangura* in the genocide and its use of propaganda will be discussed in a later section.

As mentioned previously, various types of language were used in the media before and during the genocide, and this included the use of high-context and low-context communication. High-context communication is communication that tends to be indirect, ambiguous, cautious, and subtle; low-context communication, on the other hand, tends toward directness, self-disclosure, and confrontation.⁷ In high context, what is said is not usually the entire story and much is implied, while in low context “what you hear is what you get” and there is generally directness to communication.⁸ While communication in Rwanda tends to be high-context, the media used a mix of high-context and low-context communication, though low-context communication tended to occur more often after the genocide started.

High-context language was used in RTLM broadcasts before and during the genocide. In the January 14, 1994 broadcast, RTLM announcers declared, “When we get to the point of executing our plans, UNAMIR will get a shock.”⁹ What is meant by this is unclear; in hindsight, we know this was the plan to kill ten Belgian soldiers, get UNAMIR to withdraw and allow the *Interahamwe* and others to commit genocide, but a non-Rwandan listening to the broadcast would have been confused by what RTLM was referring to. In addition, during the genocide, RTLM would greet its listeners by saying, “Hello, good day, have you started to work yet?”¹⁰ *Kangura* used high context language when it listed the Hutu “Ten Commandments”, the most well-known of which is “Hutus must cease having mercy on the Tutsi.”¹¹ This is ambiguous and would have been confusing to an outsider reading this article.

In addition to the high-context language, both RTLM and *Kangura* used low-context language, including direct incitement to commit genocide. In a May 28, 1994 broadcast, RTLM announcers declared, “If you are a cockroach you must be killed, you cannot change anything.”¹² On June 2, 1994, RTLM specifically called for the murder of a teacher named Jeanne in Mamba, claiming she taught her students to hate Hutus and was helping her Tutsi husband plan to kill Hutus in their community.¹³ On July 3, 1994, RTLM declared that they would kill all the Tutsi in Rwanda, and if Tutsis fled to other countries such as Uganda and Burundi, they would be tracked down and killed there, along with Tutsis in Burundi who supported the RPF.¹⁴ RTLM is also reported to have asked in one broadcast, “The graves are only half empty; who will help us fill them?”¹⁵ *Kangura* described Tutsis as snakes waiting to devour Rwanda, and in November 1991, the editor asked “What tools will we use to defeat the *Inyenzi* [cockroaches] once and for all?” and drew a picture of a machete to demonstrate how this would happen.¹⁶

Both RTLM and *Kangura* used fear and self-defense arguments as tactics to convince Hutus to take part in the genocide. RTLM and *Kangura* used what Jean-Pierre Chrétien calls “mirror propaganda”, which is accusing the other of what they are planning to do.¹⁷ RTLM accused the RPF and Rwandan

Tutsis of taking part in the Burundi coup that overthrew the first Hutu leader¹⁸, of pretending that the refugees wanted to return to Rwanda but really wanting to take back over Rwanda and gain all the power,¹⁹ and of plotting to assassinate President Habyarimana, overthrow the government, and kill Rwandans.²⁰ *Kangura* alleged that Tutsis were trying to control all sectors of Rwanda, especially the economic and education sectors, and wanted to have complete power in Rwanda and not share power with the Hutus.²¹

RTLTM and *Kangura* used fear language to try and convince Hutus to exterminate Tutsis as a self-defense measure, that they were in a “kill or be killed” situation. RTLTM accused the RPF and Rwandan Tutsis of wanting to return Rwanda to the days of colonialism, when the Hutus were subjugated under Tutsi rule and denied many rights. RTLTM used historians during broadcasts to remind Rwandans of their past and warn them that they would be taken back to pre-1959 conditions if they did not fight and kill the Tutsis.²² RTLTM emphasized that *all* Hutu were at risk of being attacked, enslaved, exploited, and re-colonized by *every* Tutsi and that steps should be taken to prevent this.²³ *Kangura* claimed that the Arusha Accords, the power-sharing agreement between the Rwandan government and the RPF, was bringing Rwanda back to colonial days and that a new community in Rwanda needed to be created, one that was authentic and pure, with Tutsis closely monitored to prevent their domination.²⁴ By repeatedly bringing up Rwandan history and reminding Hutus of what life was like during colonialism, RTLTM and *Kangura* created a climate of fear and convinced many Hutus to take part in the genocide in order to prevent domination by the Tutsis. Many Hutus saw their participation in the genocide as acts of self-defense, and RTLTM reinforced this idea by claiming the Tutsis were a minority and were committing suicide because they were resisting majority rule.²⁵

Alongside the use of self-defense language, both RTLTM and *Kangura* used dehumanizing language regarding the Tutsis. RTLTM called Tutsis cockroaches, dogs, and snakes, and accused them of cannibalism.²⁶ *Kangura* and other pro-government newspapers called Tutsis cockroaches and brought up old stereotypes of Tutsis, such as claiming that if a Hutu provided a Tutsi male with shelter, the Tutsi would steal his wife.²⁷ Kamilindi, a journalist before the genocide started, relates the story of being stopped at a roadblock on his way to the Hotel Mille Collines: a person at the roadblock called his not quite 2-year old daughter a “snake”, and said they would have to kill her. His daughter repeatedly asked him after that, “Am I a snake?”²⁸ Children were often victims of dehumanization and were targeted for extermination to prevent another generation of Tutsi. RTLTM also used dehumanizing language to describe killing Tutsis, including separating grass from millet, pulling poison ivy out by the roots, clearing the brush, and cutting the tall trees.²⁹ Dehumanization made racism coded or portrayed as natural, and made the eradication of Tutsis normal because they were not human; the massacres were being carried out by the majority, and therefore, was an expression of democracy, which justified the killings because they were legitimate popular uprisings, and akin to a liberation movement such as the French Revolution.³⁰

Why were RTLTM and newspapers like *Kangura* so successful in encouraging and promoting the genocide? First, RTLTM worked to gain the trust of the people by being an alternative to the stilted Radio Rwanda and its pro-government propaganda. RTLTM played music, criticized government officials, and allowed ordinary Rwandans to speak their minds about the issues of the day. Second, RTLTM and *Kangura* used a blend of what was perceived as “truth” and fiction in their propaganda. Rwanda was under attack, as the RPF had invaded from Uganda in 1990. While there was a peace agreement, no one was sure if it would last. Rwanda also had been dominated by the Tutsis during colonial rule, and Tutsis in Burundi had overthrown the democratically elected Hutu leader, leading to fears that the Tutsis in Rwanda would do the same. RTLTM and *Kangura* greatly exaggerated the RPF threat and lumped all Tutsi together as RPF accomplices or sympathizers; but the climate of fear in Rwanda, combined with the situation in Burundi, made this claim plausible to many Hutus who saw killing Tutsis as defending themselves and their country.

After the Rwandan genocide, many scholars and activists asked if it could have been prevented, and if so, how? Could the use of hate media have been prevented? Requests were made during the genocide to jam the RTLTM signal, but the US and others refused to do so on the grounds of cost and violations of free speech. Frank Chalk outlines intervention strategies to prevent or stop the use of hate media before

genocide begins, right as it begins, and when genocide is in full swing. During the pre-genocide stage, Chalk recommends domestic and foreign monitoring of the media, training programs to raise the skills and standards of local editors and journalists and strengthening internal independent media. When the genocide has just begun, Chalk recommends that international NGOs and organizations like the UN put the distributors of hate propaganda on notice that their messages are being monitored, recorded, and transcribed to enable prosecution and punishment of those responsible. After the genocide is underway, Chalk suggests destroying the transmitters and printing presses of the hate media and having foreign broadcasters warn that genocide is underway and discourage victims from meeting at targeted locations, like the churches in Rwanda.³¹

In response to the Rwandan genocide, an independent radio station was set up to cover the Great Lakes region of Africa, which includes Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Radio Agatashya broadcasts in five languages, including French, Kinyarwanda, Swahili, and English, and refuses to allow the broadcasting of personal information or opinions on the radio station. Radio Agatashya uses peace media, which is media that re-establishes communications between groups in war-torn countries and allows for people on both sides to talk to each other and get accurate information on the situation in the country.³² Radio stations like this were successfully used in Burundi to prevent the civil war from becoming genocide. How successful this could be in a genocide situation is hard to tell, but if the radio station could prevent dehumanization of the victimized group and stop the spread of propaganda, it may be able to stop genocide in the early stages.

Another prevention strategy is to encourage the creation of independent news sources in countries like Rwanda to counteract the domination of perpetrator group information and propaganda. Journalists should also be trained in being professionals to prevent their use as propaganda tools and to stop the journalists and editors from using inflammatory language to help create the conditions for genocide.³³ Unfortunately, this is a lot easier said than done, as in many countries journalists who try to be independent or criticize the government are often censored, jailed, and can be killed. In post-genocide Rwanda, the government has set up strict controls over the media, supposedly to prevent the recurrence of hate rhetoric that could lead to another genocide. Many journalists have been accused of divisionism and some journalists have been suspected of having incited the 1994 genocide and been thrown and held in jail without being tried. There are mandated maximum criminal sentences for publications that threaten law and order, public decency, hold the president in contempt, and publish false news. The Rwandan government has used these laws to prosecute journalists they think are not supportive enough of the government, and it has criticized foreign media outlets like the BBC for promoting divisionism. There are few private radio stations and newspapers, and the Rwandan government likes to screen documentary films before they are distributed to the public.³⁴

The media in Rwanda played a large role in promoting the genocide. RTLM and newspapers like *Kangura* used inflammatory rhetoric and dehumanizing language to encourage Hutus to take part in the genocide. Through a mix of high-context and low-context communication, as well as the use of fear and self-defense arguments, the media created conditions where genocide was all but inevitable. Many Rwandan journalists and media personnel have been prosecuted for their roles in the genocide, but the question remains: can hate media be prevented? The creation of a strong, independent media in countries like Rwanda would help prevent the use of media to promote hate and genocidal ideology, but it is very difficult to create such media in dictatorial and repressive states. Rwanda still represses independent journalism, under the guise of preventing genocide from recurring. In addition, when asked to stop RTLM broadcasts by jamming the signal, the US and other countries refused to do so. The creation of radio stations like Radio Agatashya could help promote dialogue between different groups in war-torn or fragile countries, but without strong international support for independent journalism and a willingness to stop hate speech, hate media will continue to be used in conflict situations to promote genocide.

ENDNOTES

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