Case Study - Rwanda

The 1994 Rwandan genocide is the seminal example of the use of media as a tool to instigate conflict. By now the tragic series of events is well-known. Following an April 6 plane crash over the capital, Kigali, which killed Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana and Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira, a systematic, pre-orchestrated genocide commenced. It was organized primarily by members of the Hutu-dominated Mouvement Revolutionaire pour le Developpement (MRND), and their targets were almost entirely minority Tutsis and Hutus opposed to the MRND. The genocide was carried out mainly by members of militias and the army, but a significant number of Hutu civilians took part as well. By the time the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) took Kigali on July 19 and the killing subsided, up to one million Rwandans were dead.

The behavior of the nominally private radio station Radio Television Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) prior to and during the genocide has been well documented, and the missed opportunities for the international community to intervene by jamming RTLM or by other means have been thoroughly analyzed. Though analysts differ on the extent to which abuse of Rwandan media was a direct cause of the genocide, all agree that it was used to set the scene for the mass killing that later erupted. “In Rwanda,” Gowing writes, “hate radio… systematically laid the groundwork for mass slaughter from the moment it was licensed in July 1993.” It also helped facilitate the genocide, as RTLM broadcast names, addresses and license plate numbers of Tutsi targets. “Killers often carried a machete in one hand and a transistor radio in the other” according to Power.

RTLM and the propaganda it broadcast did not happen by accident. Rather, the founding of the station in 1992 by Hutu hard-liners closely associated with the government and its subsequent activities were “directly promoted by government authorities” as “the political and military elite established RTLM as part of this broader strategy to thwart the impact of internal reform.” Further evidence of this strategy is found in the fact that prior to the genocide the government distributed free radios around the country in order to allow Rwandans to tune into RTLM, and that RTLM was “allowed to broadcast on the same frequencies as the national radio when Radio Rwanda [the national state-owned station] was not transmitting.” Though officially private, RTLM “was essentially the tool of Hutu extremists from the government, military and business communities.”

RTLM and other hate media were not a direct cause of the genocide; Kirschke observes that:

RTLM did not independently cause the violence, but rather served as one of many instruments which this [MRND and government] elite used to facilitate the killing once it was underway. RTLM engaged in incitement to genocide during this period, however, there is no compelling evidence to suggest that its broadcasts caused a significant number of random individuals to partake in the killing.
Rwandans, which ideally positioned it to incite hatred and lay the groundwork for genocide. The station’s lively content and musical component it appealed particularly to young male listeners. This formula quickly made RTLM Rwanda’s most popular station. Because of the station’s reliability, an indication of its proximity to those in power; Article 19 noted that “government officials easily manipulated information about the RPF and security issues as a pretext to incite violence against Tutsi civilians.” Media were used to create the false impression that the RPF attack was imminent and that Hutus were in grave danger. Thus, preemptive action by Hutus, in an effort to “defend” themselves, was portrayed as necessary in order to head off the looming RPF attack and foil their plans. RTLM “stressed constantly the need for self-defense against Tutsi, warning that Hutu must be prepared to fight against them to the last person.” In other words, RTLM attempted to create the impression conflict was inevitable, and that Hutus had no choice but to slaughter Tutsis in order to save themselves.

Second, Rwandan hate radio sought to demonize and “dehumanize” Tutsis in order to create the impression that killing Tutsis was not akin to killing other humans, thus making the act somehow more acceptable and easier to carry out. RTLM broadcasters frequently referred to RPF soldiers as inyenzi, literally meaning "cockroaches," and tried to spread the myth that Tutsis were inhuman in their thirst for blood, urging listeners to "understand that the cruelty of the inyenzi is incurable, the cruelty of the inyenzi can be cured only by their total extermination." Through such deception, RTLM endeavored to create the impression that participating in the genocide was every Hutu’s responsibility, and that remaining on the sidelines would be both unpatriotic and unsafe.

One of the reasons RTLM’s propaganda was so effective was that the station was good at what it did. RTLM was the first Rwandan radio station to adopt a western-style talk radio format featuring opportunities for listeners to call in and speak on the air, which proved immensely popular with Rwandans whose options on the radio dial were limited. "It adopted a fast-paced, informal style that featured the latest popular music," according to Des Forges. "Several announcers were famous for their quick wit and command of the nuances of kinyarwanda, the language used for most broadcasts." RTLM did not bore its listeners with regular, repetitive news reports, opting instead to play music from well-known Rwandan musicians, including Simon Bikindi, famous for his anti-Tutsi hit "I hate these Hutus" (in addition to composing xenophobic ballads, Bikindi was one of the founding shareholders of RTLM). Interspersed with the music were commentaries, interviews and other original pieces. This formula quickly made RTLM Rwanda’s most popular station. Because of the station’s lively content and musical component it appealed particularly to young male Rwandans, which ideally positioned it to incite hatred and lay the groundwork for genocide.

Another explanation for the effectiveness of RTLM and Radio Rwanda [discussed below] was that they learned to disguise their propaganda. The stations generally broadcast in two languages – French and Kinyarwanda – but their broadcasts in Kinyarwanda, understood almost exclusively by people in the region, tended to be much more virulent than those in French, understood by people across the globe. Thus these stations were able to cover their tracks because the truly antagonistic propaganda could not be understood by members of the international community, and there were virtually no translations available.

RTLM was not alone on the Rwandan hate media scene. In fact, it was in the print media where hate speech against Tutsis first gained prominence and “became so systemic as to seem the norm.” The state-owned newspaper Kangura (meaning “Wake Up” in Kinyarwanda) was the original organ of hate media, as it began demonizing Tutsis and the RPF in October 1990. Its effectiveness can largely be attributed to its reliability, an indication of its proximity to those in power; Article 19 observed that “whatever Kangura called for usually occurred, when it related to specific individuals, and this added to the fear which the newspaper inspired.” Kangura was followed by similar publications with links to President’ Habyarimana’s regime and powerful Hutu individuals. Kangura’s methods were similar to those of RTLM and many of the themes popularized by RTLM actually originated from the pages of Kangura. In the ongoing International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, the individuals behind Kangura have been accused of producing leaflets in 1992 picturing a machete and asking “What shall we do to complete the social revolution of 1959?” (A reference to the...
politically orchestrated communal violence in 1959 that resulted in thousands of mostly Tutsi casualties and forced roughly 300,000 Tutsis to flee to neighboring Burundi and Uganda. Kangura also published the infamous "10 Hutu Commandments," which called upon Hutus to massacre Tutsis, and the paper generally went to great lengths to create the impression that the RPF had a devious grand strategy, at one point featuring an article titled "Tutsi colonization plan."

Radio Rwanda, the official government station, was also complicit in promoting violence. The strategy used was similar to that employed by RTLM and Kangura; for example, in March 1992 the station "warned that Hutu leaders were going to be murdered by Tutsi, false information meant to spur the Hutu massacre of Tutsi." Such reports, in which "Radio Rwanda provided patently false and inflammatory reports on the RPF and the extent of their hostilities," were frequent; one report in 1992 falsely claimed that then RPF President and current Rwandan President Paul Kagame had been killed by a mine. Later that year the station started broadcasting communications from a fictitious organization warning of impending widespread conflict. In 1993, the station featured an interview with a woman who told a fabricated story about how RPF troops beat her with a hammer and threw her into a mass grave. When she managed to climb out of the grave, she said, she saw the soldiers remove a fetus from a pregnant woman and then force the woman to prepare a meal. Clearly, this story was intended to dehumanize RPF soldiers, most of who are Tutsis, and justify their slaughter. There were attempts by opposition parties to reform Radio Rwanda in 1992 and 1993, and because they were partially successful disgruntled Hutus founded RTLM. But once the genocide began Radio Rwanda was "pulled into the orbit of RTLM" as they "collaborated to deliver a single message about the need to extirpate the 'enemy.'"

RTLM left the airwaves when the genocide ended in July 1994, but its influence persisted. Some of RTLM's equipment may have been handed over to Radio Rutomarango (also known, inappropriately, as Radio Democracy), a pirate station based in Zaire broadcasting into Burundi, a country with demographics similar to those of Rwanda and a history of ethnic conflict between Hutus and Tutsis. In August of 1994 Radio Rutomarango began broadcasting hate propaganda directed against Burundian Tutsis that smacked of tactics eerily similar to those used by RTLM (although it has been argued that "the same could be said of the broadcasts from the [Burundi] government-controlled station."). However, this time around the international community's response was considerably swifter. The Burundian government called for the station to be shut down, as did the UN Security Council, a UN sub-committee and the NGO Reporters sans Frontiers. In 1995 US officials decided that they could legally play a role in silencing the station, but before they could the tone of the stations' broadcasts became less virulent. Nonetheless, in 1996, the Burundian government decided to jam the station's signal, "apparently using equipment from the Israeli government." This made the signal difficult to pick up in the capital, but it remained accessible in more remote areas.