

The Effect of RTLM's Rhetoric of Ethnic Hatred in Rural Rwanda

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Because of its inflammatory rhetoric and extremist views, much has been made of the role of RTLM in the genocide of 1994. According to Des Forges (1999: 71), it was the 'sole source of news as well as the sole authority for interpreting its meaning' during the genocide. Although no one really disputes the genocidal overtones of RTLM's broadcasting, there *is* disagreement about the causal link between the words on the air and the violence on the ground.

Some feel that without the assistance of RTLM, the *genocidaires* could not have succeeded to the extent that they did. Mahmood Mandani's thesis about Tutsi as a racialized political identity cites RTLM as one of 'two propaganda organs [that] were central to this effort [recasting Tutsi as a race]' (Mandani 2001:190). The US State Department asserted that RTLM broadcasts 'ultimately had a lethal effect, calling on the Hutu majority to destroy the Tutsi minority. Experts cite RTML as an important factor in the spread of genocide in the hours and days following Habyarimana's death' (Chalk 1999: 97). Chrétien and his colleagues, authors of the most comprehensive analysis of the role of media in the genocide to date, give central importance to radio (including RTLM), saying, 'Two tools, one very modern, the other less [modern] were particularly used during the genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda: the radio and the machete. The former to give and receive orders, the second to carry them out' (Chrétien et al. 1995: 191).

But some scholars have contested the role of radio, specifically RTLM, in the genocide. For example, Richard Carver writes that:

Most commentary on Rwandan hate radio has worked on the simple assumption that since RTLM broadcast propaganda for genocide and genocide did indeed occur, there must be a causal relationship between the two ... the notion that people could be incited to acts of extreme violence by the radio is *only tenable* if it is accepted that RTLM propaganda unlocked profound or even primordial hatred. [Milles Collines] may have produced propaganda for the genocide but it did not incite it. (Carver 2000:190, emphasis added)

Carver identifies the leap of logic in relating hate speech to murder, without more compelling evidence that the murderers were, in fact, somehow motivated

or crucially affected by the radio's message. Carver makes an interesting observation:

RTLM broadcast hate propaganda, there was genocide, and therefore one caused another. If we were talking about almost any other issue – violence on television, pornography or whatever – those arguing in favour of a ban would attempt to demonstrate at least a cursory link between the broadcast and the action. There is now an abundant research to suggest that it is impossible to draw a linear causal link between what people see or hear in the media and how they behave. But because it is genocide we abandon our critical faculties. (Carver 1996)

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relation between the rhetoric of ethnic hatred so prevalent among Rwandan political elites and the forces that propelled ordinary Rwandan Hutus to participate in killing Tutsis. Information was collected in conversations conducted in 2000 with nearly 100 confessed perpetrators held in six Rwandan prisons: Kigali, Butare, Rilima, Gitarama, Gisenyi and Ruhengeri.

OVERVIEW OF RTLM, FORM AND FUNCTION

The RTLM signal originally reached only greater Kigali and part of the surrounding countryside, but from 8 July 1993 it could also be heard throughout the country and in the north of Burundi. RTLM broadcast every night on FM 106 for a few hours – more if there were major events to report – but it also used FM 94, one of Radio Rwanda's transmitter frequencies.

RTLM was especially popular among the youth, because it played up-to-date music from Zaire. RTLM recruited the best Kinyarwanda and French speakers and journalists including foreigners. These journalists promoted the station, which they called 'Radio Sympa' (lovely radio), claiming that it was the radio 'of the people, for the people.' For example, one broadcaster, Gaspard Gahigi, welcomes ordinary citizens:

We have a radio here, even a peasant who wants to say something can come, and we will give him the floor. Then, other peasants will be able to hear what peasants think. Personally, I think what complicates things is that ordinary citizens have no forum where they can speak. Normally, for ordinary citizens to speak, they speak through elections and elections are impossible. So, in fact, ordinary citizens have been deprived of a say but RTLM is there, we will give them the floor. (Gaspard Gahigi, RTLM, 19 March 1994)

What makes us happy here at RTLM is that we broadcast your announcements quickly, very quickly, I mean, it is just like making wood fire glow [*kwenyegeza*]. You bring a message any time and you say: 'Ha! Put it now, and then we put it in very quickly so that your messages reach ... whoever you want.' (Gaspard Gahigi, RTLM, 15 December 1993)

Kantano Habimana, a popular RTLM broadcaster, bragged that people could not follow foreign news because it was in French or English. In contrast, RTLM's Ananie Nkurunziza monitored foreign news for 'our RTLM' (31 May 1993). Nkurunziza's spin on international reports was an analysis that justified RTLM hate speech, discredited the Arusha peace talks and condemned the international community because it was supposedly on the side of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Likewise, Kantano spoke against the rival RPF radio station, Muhabura.

I don't understand how a Rwandan can follow what Muhabura radio says ... Muhabura radio broadcasts from far away in the bush. Instead of trusting RTLM radio, which broadcasts near him, they are together and they are also together with journalists whom he can see and even ask them the situation. So, those people who listen to Muhabura radio, let them get lost [mentally lost], let them get lost but they will regret it for a long time. (Kantano Habimana, RTLM, 25 May 1993)

RTLM broadcasts also trumpeted a version of Rwandan history that pitted Hutu against Tutsi in a story of foreign invasion and ethnic domination.

Tutsi are nomads and invaders who came to Rwanda in search of pasture, but because they are so cunning and malicious, the Tutsi managed to stay and rule. If you allow the Tutsi-Hamites to come back, they will not only rule you in Rwanda, but will also extend their power throughout the Great Lakes Region. (RTLM, 2 December 1993, author's translation from Kinyarwanda)

ETHNIC CONSCIOUSNESS OF CONFESSED PERPETRATORS

My line of questioning in interviews with confessed genocide perpetrators focused on the practices of media consumption in Rwanda. Ideally, I would have observed people listening to the radio, discussing its content and circulating these ideas in their everyday lives, but this was not possible during the genocide. Instead, I collected the comments and reflections of low-level perpetrators six years after the fact, during interviews conducted in 2000.

During the interviews, I discerned differences between the possible impact of RTLM on people in urban areas and on ordinary peasants (*abaturage*) who lived in remote villages (*ibyarokore*). RTLM appears to have been especially effective in Kigali, where it issued vehement instructions to foment violence at roadblocks, broadcast names of escaped Tutsi and their hiding places, threatened Tutsi youth, broadcast lists of 'accomplices' (*ibyitso*) to kill and encouraged listeners to 'get rid of the dirt' (*gukuraho umwanda*).

Interviews with genocide perpetrators also led me to make a distinction between the responses to RTLM hate speech and propaganda of two distinct audiences. One audience was the urban jobless youth, trained and operating under the umbrella of the *Interahamwe*. These young people held portable radios to their ears on roadblocks and around commercial centres. The other was pro-

government middle-class urban dwellers, including civil servants, professionals and businessmen.

According to Debra Spitulnik's approach to understanding the role of media in social life, it is important to

factor in what is happening at the levels of reception and *lateral communication*, such as the social circulation of media discourse outside of contexts of direct media consumption. I suggest ... that the repeating, recycling, and recontextualizing of media discourse is an important component in the formation of community in a kind of subterranean way, because it establishes an indirect connectivity or intertextuality across media consumers and across instances of media consumption. (Spitulnik 2001: 98, emphasis added)

In the cities in the former Belgian colonies, lateral communication took place via a broad urban gossip network called *radio trottoir* (sidewalk radio), which transmitted 'counter-hegemonic' popular discourses that often contested information dispensed by official media. Writing with respect to Kinshasa, Schoepf (1993) talks about *radio trottoir*, an urban version of the 'bush-telephone' that used talking drums to carry news to settlements separated by long distances.¹ Bourgault (1995: 201–3) describes the *radio trottoir* alternative to the official press in the francophone West African countries of Togo and Cameroon. He suggests that even if masses at the bottom of society are passive, they have evolved their own discursive means to resist oppressive discourse from above. In densely populated rural Rwanda, a 'bush-telephone' operated with great efficiency using word-of-mouth, without recourse to drums.

By exploring the theme of radio and radio consumption with groups of prisoners, I have been able to glimpse some of this 'lateral communication' and 'circulation' in a newly fashioned community – the community of confessed perpetrators. For my analysis, I drew on three key concepts from Spitulnik's (1996) article 'The Social Circulation of Media Discourse and the Mediation of communities': consumption, circulation and community.

Examining radio and language in contemporary Zambia, Spitulnik argues that radio today achieves what newspapers did in the colonial world. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of 'imagined communities', she writes that it creates a shared cognitive space, a *community* of listeners who incorporate its linguistic elements into their everyday lives in both conscious and unconscious ways. Spitulnik focuses on the circulation of language – lexical items, catchphrases, semantic fields, and discourse styles – as evidence of this community of people who cannot see each other. I will consider the additional possibility that radio might affect more than symbolic behaviour, that is, speech, and actually contribute to the commission of violent actions, that is, murder.

Spitulnik locates radio within a broader discursive context and seeks to understand the inter-textualities or cross-linkages between mass media and other forms of discourse. It has been established that the ethnically divisive rhetoric that characterized RTLTM broadcasts overlapped with, and borrowed from, the social scientific discourse from the colonial period and with political

speech from the first and second republics. The importance of radio in a place like Zambia, as in Rwanda, is related to the fact that it is the most widely consumed medium in the country and ‘the same broadcasts are accessible to the entire national population at the same time and, thus, allow for the possibility of producing a degree of shared *linguistic* knowledge across a population of roughly 9.1 million’ (Spitulnik 2001: 99, emphasis added).

If we substitute the word ‘ideological’ for ‘linguistic’, we begin to see the potential for RTLMS to serve both as ‘reservoir and reference point’ for ideas of ethnic hatred and violence for five or six million Rwandans. If we add that radio audiences were well aware that they were audiences (not individuals), that millions of others were simultaneously listening as well, the intensity of their potential is increased.

However, Spitulnik advances the idea that language broadcast on the radio is not passively consumed by listeners, but is actively re-centred, reinterpreted and re-circulated. The listeners are ‘active decoders ... of media messages, who accept, reject, or resist what is conveyed based on their own class position within society’ (Spitulnik 1993: 297). This latter point is crucial to understanding the listenership of RTLMS and prevents us from assuming that what elites, professionals and townspeople ‘heard’ on RTLMS is the same as what rural dwellers ‘heard’.

This could not have been made more clear to me in my interviews with confessors. The first response to my questions was often a claim of ignorance of RTLMS. Some professed to know nothing of its message or its role in inciting violence. Many informants told me that they did not listen to RTLMS at all, either because they did not own radios (or had no batteries) or because they did not perceive themselves to be part of the target audience for this radio station. Radio technology in general was presented by the perpetrators as something alien to the rural peasantry, a medium of information that requires special education or political credentials to make sense of its messages.

I was a cultivator, so what can I tell you about it? I don’t know anything about the radio. (Interview, Kigali prison, 20 September 2000)

In the countryside, things of radio do not exist. (Interview, Kigali prison, September 2000)

I don’t know anything about it. This is the first time [I am hearing about this]. (Interview, Rilima prison, 21 September 2000)

We had a radio but I did not hear anything. (Interview, Rilima prison, September 2000)

Except that I am a peasant and it does not concern me. Do you think I even know what RTLMS stands for? Not at all! (Interview, Gitarama prison, 9 September 2000)

How can you listen to the radio when you did not go to school? When you can't read and write? (Interview, Butare prison, 29 September 2000)

Given these informants' apparent lack of identification with the political message of RTLM, it was interesting to explore their awareness and understanding of the messages broadcast on Radio Muhabura, the station run by the RPF, from the National Park (*Parc National des Volcans*) at the Rwanda–Uganda border. Radio Muhabura broadcast in full AM frequency and could be heard in most parts of Rwanda except the south (Chrétien et al. 1995). In separate interviews, all the confessors expressed the same thing: it was strictly forbidden to listen to Radio Muhabura in Rwanda, and anyone found doing so was beaten or otherwise punished.

One informant told me that I should have an equal or greater understanding of RTLM's broadcasts than he did, as if it broadcast to educated elites around the world, but was somehow opaque and foreign to Rwandan peasants:

Q: Now, do you think that in the situation you went through there is something, which could be attributed to what the radio broadcast?

A: Peasants [*Abaturage*] like us did not even have any radios.

Q: Why do they say it anyway? So, you never heard anyone saying it?

A: Radio? A person who did not have a radio heard it from someone else. For example, RTLM said that ...

Q: But what do you think? Telling you: 'kill or do this' or hearing it from the radio, is it the same thing?

A: No. Hearing it only could not have any impact. People were forced to kill by those soldiers. But simply hearing from the radio could not do anything.

Q: You heard it from the radio and you saw people killing?

A: I mean, soldiers brought it [the killing] and then RTLM reported it. For example, I had a small radio. The radio used to broadcast it. You found out that what it broadcast was what the soldiers were doing. So, it was necessary that we do it too. Because the leadership supported it, we accepted it. (Interview, Ruhengeri prison, 27 September 2000)

By claiming ignorance of the radio and its message, by suggesting that they were essentially incapable of participating in the political project that the radio represents, these perpetrators position themselves as bystanders or even victims of the larger struggle between Hutu political elites in Kigali and the invading force of Tutsi exiles in the RPF. This idea of being caught between two powerful and dangerous forces pervades the perpetrators' narratives and finds expression in a well-known proverb: 'In a war between elephants, it's the grass that gets trampled. We are the grass' (Interview, Gisenyi prison, 25 September 2000).

Far from being unable to understand what RTLM was exhorting them to do, though, these perpetrators offer ample evidence that they understood the radio's message and that they themselves *were*, in fact, a specifically targeted audience, precisely because they were seen as being on the margins of ethnic politics and not naturally inclined to take up arms against their Tutsi neighbours. In other

words, the radio messages were needed to involve them in killings that many were not initially inclined to perform. The interviews offer further emphasis against the primordial hypothesis.

Q: Sure, I understand you. So, there is the issue ... of RTLM? I would like to understand also how a radio announces something and people do it. Can you give me an example?

A: In fact, I don't own a radio because I am a cultivator [*umuhinzi*]. From the fact that I was a cultivator, I had no radio. But in fact, [some people] used to say that radio RTLM was urging us [*idushishikarije*] to kill people ... killings. It said: 'the enemy is Tutsi.' And when a peasant hears that, that person has no choice ... When he meets a person he doesn't know, he says to himself: 'this is the one who came to eradicate us, he came to fight us.'... You understand that, this also brought a bad atmosphere [*umwuka mubi*; literally, bad air] among people. (Interview, Ruhengeri prison, 27 September 2000)

Another genocide confessor confirmed:

A: RTLM? You mean that radio? People who owned radios are the ones who listened to it.

Q: No, you can tell me what you heard from other people.

A: The so-called radios [*iby'o biradiyo*] of RTLM ... [implies a bad thing. With a dismissive tone, he looks away.] Except that they announced: 'find out who the enemy is.' Then they announced that: 'the Tutsi is the enemy.' (Interview, Gisenyi prison, 25 September 2000)

The same informant recalled a particular announcer on RTLM encouraging peasants to cultivate and to be armed and vigilant while waiting for the enemy from outside.

Then they said: 'Look, while a Hutu is cultivating, he has a gun because they were distributed to them. You should have them with you when you are cultivating. When the enemy comes up, you shoot at each other. When he retreats, then you take up your hoe and cultivate!'... Such things were also announced. That is, they were doing sensitization about those things [*kubisansibiliza*] among peasants. They told them: 'Follow what the radio is saying.' (Interview, Gisenyi prison, 25 September 2000)

Did RTLM get its message of hatred across to different audiences to the same degree? Mindful of Spitulnik's idea of a mass-mediated community of active consumers or, put differently, with common reference points but the potential for different reactions to them, let us turn to the perpetrators' reflections about radio.

Beyond the initial claims of ignorance of RTLM's presence, its mission and its intended audience, a closer analysis of the perpetrators' reflections suggests that they had a clear understanding of what they were being told to do.

On 6 April 1994, when the president's plane was shot down, RTLM announced that Habyarimana had been killed by the RPF and that everyone in the country should stay where they were. In interview after interview, nearly every informant recalled this directive disseminated via the radio. Subsequently, RTLM, aka 'Radio *Rutwitsi*' (the radio that sets fire) encouraged the *Interahamwe* in their mission of defeating the *Inkotanyi* (Rwandan Patriotic Army). It emphasized the message that *all* Hutu were at risk of being attacked, overwhelmed, recolonized and exploited by *all* Tutsi and that appropriate measures should be taken to prevent this.

According to the interviewees, RTLM preached fear of and hatred toward Tutsi and told its listeners to avenge the 'head of the nation'. Some recalled that RTLM insisted that Hutu should separate themselves from Tutsi because of war. They remembered that the Tutsi were identified as their enemies, outsiders, invaders and cunning manipulators. They recalled that RTLM said that the only way to defend the nation in general, and one's own safety and security in particular, was to pre-emptively destroy not only the Rwandan Patriotic Front, but also every Tutsi, even the unborn.

Don't you know that after Habyarimana's death, radios announced that: '*Inkotanyi* are barking ... *hohooohoooo!!!*' Also that: '*Inkotanyi* attacked before us. They [Tutsi] had said that they would kill Hutu and now they have pre-empted us. Women should go nowhere.' (Interview, Rilima prison, 21 September 2000)

Many of the perpetrators I spoke with expressed ambivalence about RTLM's message that 'cultivators' (understood to be synonymous with 'peasants') stood for all Hutu and the only legitimate Rwandans. One man stated: 'RTLM talked about Hutu as cultivators, the children of cultivators' (*Benesebahinzi*) and said that 'everyone should join in the violence against the enemy.' The enemy was not limited to the RPF alone. 'RTLM said that the enemy was your accomplice neighbour (*icyitso*), so you must be vigilant.'

To the extent that these perpetrators bring into the discussion the ideological conflation of the Hutu extremist elites with all Hutu and the rebel army of Tutsi exiles with all Tutsi, they are implicitly resisting the interpretation that the genocide was fundamentally rooted in primordial ethnic sentiments and hatred. In fact some explicitly stated the opposite:

In fact, the way everything came up, we were not ... we appeared like people who did not know beforehand. We were all united together. We even started to fight what is known as *Interahamwe*. We were defeated later because *Interahamwe* had guns. At that point, they started convincing us [*kutwinjizamo*; literally, to push into us] that Tutsi are our enemies.

We shared, we were the same, we intermarried [and] there was no problem between us. Then, it happened just like that, eh ... even when that radio RTLM was talking about 'ethnicity' [*ubwoko*], *Interahamwe* had already been killed in Kamonyi. They were killed by villagers and commune police. They were

fighting together ... even bourgmester was fighting ... fighting *Interahamwe* at Taba in Kamonyi.²

When RTLMS broadcast that Tutsi have finished off Hutu, then we started being afraid. So, how did it happen? We noticed that it came from Runda. They came saying that ... in fact, we spent the day on the hill waiting for *Interahamwe* in order to fight them. At around 3 p.m. people from Igihinga came and ordered us to eat cows belonging to other people. We took cows belonging to a Tutsi who was there. His cattle keeper had fled with them for security, but he lived in Runda. So, they forced us to eat them. Eeh! They then took four, we took three. Good. At dawn they came back and took another cow. Then they killed the first person. They killed him because of people from Igihinga. That is how things started and then it grew tougher [*ibintu birakomera*; literally, it became hardened, i.e., more serious] from there onwards. (Interview, Gitarama prison, 29 September 2000)

Informants suggest that the rhetoric of the radio implicitly acknowledged the lack of ethnic division among rural peasants. The messages recalled by the perpetrators seem designed to induce rural dwellers to break the bonds of neighbourhood solidarity (see also Longman 1995). Perhaps in an effort to appeal directly to those who were less willing to kill their neighbours, this rhetoric often took the form of agrarian metaphors:

The radio told us to clear the bushes. There was no person who did not hear that! (Interview, Gisenyi prison)

RTLMS said to 'separate the grass from the millet' [i.e., weed out the Tutsi]. (Interview, Gisenyi prison, 25 September 2000)

Bikindi told people 'to pull out the poison ivy together with its roots.' (Interview, Gisenyi prison, 25 September 2000)

In another interview that began with denial, the informant shared euphemisms learned through lateral communication.

Q: Uuh, so, did you listen to RTLMS radio in you area?

A: Radio, where?

Q: Uuh ...

A: I didn't even own a radio then.

Q: No, you did not listen to radio RTLMS. So, you didn't hear anything from other people. Is it the first time you hear about it?

A: RTLMS?

Q: Uuh, of Kantano, etc. No ... is this the first time you hear about it?

A: RTLMS was that radio which broadcast hot news [*yashyushyaga amakuru*], telling people: 'Work!' [*Mukore*] I heard about it from what people told me, because I did not own a radio. Or from people in a place where I would be staying because I did not own a radio at that time.

Q: Uuuh, uuh, telling people to work [*gukora*]?

A: It told people to kill Tutsi. After all, wasn't [it] explained openly? ... Through conversations with other people, I heard that [RTL] had very hot news during that period of killings. (Interview, Butare prison, September 2000)

Although these comments buttress arguments about the power of radio to demonize, incite and perhaps even direct violence, they also yield evidence that as active (re)interpreters of RTL's message, many ordinary peasants in the ranks of the low-level perpetrators did not swallow everything they heard whole. Even as they reflected on the role of the radio six years after the fact, these people make it clear that for most ordinary Rwandan peasants (*abaturage*), radio was viewed as a medium for the urban, the educated and the elite.³ This resonates strongly with Spitulnik's argument that 'the communities mediated by radio broadcasting are several. Since media discourse is not uniformly accessible or even uniformly seized upon and interpreted in the same ways, all kinds of outcomes are possible' (Spitulnik 2001: 113).

Similarly, while some Rwandan villagers may have listened to broadcasts, many stated that they did not. They heard the messages from others, however, and understood the ideological significance of certain songs, speeches and the reporting of current events from others. Nevertheless, this information *alone* did not cause them to kill. It is, therefore, necessary to explore other reasons why these Rwandans took part in the genocide.

NOTES

1. The Connaissida Project in Kinshasa, in which I participated in 1985–98 highlighted the importance of *radio trottoir* in changing perceptions of AIDS.
2. Survivors' testimony collected by African Rights from Gikongoro and Butare prefectures also mentions initial flight and fighting by Hutu and Tutsi neighbours against *Interahamwe* from outside. The Hutu who were with them, they said, did not understand that only Tutsi were being targeted for killing (African Rights 1995: 329, 330, 332).
3. To some extent, however, it seems likely that some confessed perpetrators were seeking to distance themselves from the local rural elites who were leaders of genocide.

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