

Media as a tool for war: Unmasking abhorrence media's role as a weapon of war and the argument for ethical journalism

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The darkest corners of human history are filled with the conflict and tension that has ignited violence and the mass killing of innocents since shortly after the birth of mankind. It wasn't until recently, however, that technology flourished and a new tool emerged, one with unparalleled reach and potential: media. Today, the media's role as a catalyst in war demands reflection and scrutiny. Through the mass spread of information, propaganda can be spread, truths can be distorted, and hate can be normalized. This digital age provides a new problem where the line between truth and lies blurs. While technology has numerous benefits, it is imperative to recognize its effects when abused and the ways it can be a weapon for destruction as made evident by wartime history like in the Rwandan genocide.

A country that still hasn't fully recovered from genocide, from a time when the world turned its back, and from a time that displaced millions of natives, Rwanda looks back on a horrifying historical event as a testimony to the need for responsible and ethical media practices. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. Starting April 7, 1994, Rwanda descended into one of the most notorious modern genocides in history, though the conflict lasted only 100 days (Tasamba, 2021). Almost one million people were slaughtered and discriminated against as the United Nations stood by and watched.

The major ethnic groups of Rwanda were called Hutu and Tutsi and composed most of the Rwandan general population. Differences between both groups were profound as evident in their appearances, social, and economic status. The two groups were known for periods of cooperation and intermarriages before colonial rule. However, the Belgian administration's rule in Rwanda exacerbated tension and created a deep divide in the country. During colonial rule, the Tutsi minority were often considered superior due to their physical appearance and economic status. However, when Rwanda gained independence, the majority Hutu group assumed power and tried to blame the Tutsi for their socio-economic issues. Overall, public opinion about the two groups heavily depended on colonial legacies and political manipulation (Lower and Hauschildt, 2014).

The role of media is credited by many as one major impetus that drove the country into bloodshed. Specifically, the Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, also known as RTLM, spewed savage propaganda against the Tutsi, depicting them as enemies (Straus, 2009). The RTLM was funded by Hutu extremists and individuals associated with the government. Businesses also supported the radio station in support of the Hutu extremist agenda. The government-sponsored RTLM spread rumors about the Tutsi people, encouraging and justifying brutality and extreme hatred. They did this by stereotyping the Tutsi group, false accusations, and historical inaccuracy. For example, in an excerpt from the RTLM, they paint the Rwandan genocide as a slave rebellion against the Tutsi, which is distorted and provides fabricated justification for violence. In reality, the Rwandan genocide was a meticulously orchestrated event characterized by systemic killing rather than an uprising or rebellion. As a result of this propaganda, people from Rwanda were either Tutsi or Hutu as opposed to Rwandan, and you either supported the agenda or didn't. This created a divide in the country, which only became more polarized. After the Rwandan president's airplane was shot down, the country spiraled into

a state of turmoil and the assassination escalated ethnic tensions (Kellow and Steeves, 1998). The RTLM became an active organizer of violence catapulting the nation into brutality. The manipulation of media sparked conflict, savagery, and divided people leaving Rwanda shattered in a state of complete ruin.

This dehumanization and violence against the Tutsi people was normalized through the media and triggered the escalation of mass murder. The normalization accelerated rapidly in the months leading up to the genocide where acts of violence became common and almost accepted within society. It took decades of conflict to reach its horrifying climax in 1994. Throughout the genocide, the radio broadcasted petrifying misinformation and justified everything as “self-defense” (Straus, 2009). Misinformation included racial stereotypes portraying them as deceitful and manipulative, and false allegations that the Tutsi were plotting to overthrow the government and commit atrocities against the Hutu. By masking the truth, ethnic violence was perpetuated which led to the horrifying countrywide scale of the genocide. This highlights the imperative need for truth amidst such horrors, emphasizing the transformative power of media and its potential malevolence in the wrong hands. Without the use of propaganda and misinformation, the Hutu would not have been able to persuade such a large population to commit such atrocities.

According to an interview conducted by the United Nations with a Tutsi victim, “the Government put it [propaganda] out there, in the media, newspapers, and radio, encouraging and preaching anti-Tutsi propaganda,” (Mutegwaraba 2023). This widespread dissemination performed by the government was pivotal in its role as a catalyst in the Rwandan genocide. The radio, which was widely listened to by the general population including urban and rural areas, created an atmosphere of hostility and endorsed violence. The RTLM has been described as “death by radio” or “radio genocide” because of its contribution to the staggering death toll of the Rwandan genocide (Lower and Hauschildt, 2014).

While technology and media have countless benefits and can facilitate progress and community, misuse has extremely dire consequences that must be acknowledged and addressed.

This pervasive use of media amplified the spread of misinformation, which has been witnessed in the case of Rwanda. This is a testament to the influential impact of mass communication in shaping public perspective. In the aftermath of the genocide, Rwanda has implemented systems like the Gacaca Court, a community-based justice system that aims to promote honesty and accountability (Haberstock 2014). Additionally, reconciliation efforts have been enforced to promote unity between the two groups. Survivors from the event struggle to rebuild from the atrocity that the world had witnessed and failed to act upon. The media’s deceitful and devastating role in the Rwandan genocide remains a call to action that highlights the urgent need to practice responsible tech usage to prevent recurring disasters.

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