

The Role of the Media in the Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda

The media played a central role in the spread of the ideology of genocide in Rwanda. It served not only as a platform for disseminating hate but also as an instrument for preparing and implementing the Genocide against the Tutsi.

Newspapers and radio stations became powerful tools through which hatred, division, and fear were systematically spread across the country. Instead of informing the public responsibly, sections of the media abandoned the principles of journalism and became active participants in a political project that ultimately culminated in genocide.

To understand the role of the media in Rwanda, one must begin with *Kinyamateka*, the country's first newspaper.

Founded on September 1, 1933, by Catholic missionaries in collaboration with Bishop Léon-Paul Classe of the Diocese of Kabgayi, *Kinyamateka* was the first newspaper to be published in Rwanda. Initially, it represented an important milestone in the country's intellectual and social development. Yet history also reveals that it later became one of the publications through which ethnic divisions and political hostility were promoted.

It is worth noting that Grégoire Kayibanda, who would later become the first President of the Republic of Rwanda, worked as a journalist for *Kinyamateka* during the 1950s.

Rwandan historian Tom Ndahiro argues that *Kinyamateka* played a significant role in spreading ethnic hatred. He points to an article entitled *PARMEHUTU: The Party of the Liberators*, attributed to "Muhoracyeye D." and published in *Kinyamateka* No. 1340 in February 1991.

The article praised PARMEHUTU by declaring that:

"PARMEHUTU completely abolished servitude and oppression, restored dignity to the Hutu in Rwanda, established the Republic on January 28, 1961, and led the country to independence..."

Ndahiro further notes that no journalist by the name of Muhoracyeye D. actually worked for *Kinyamateka* in 1991, raising serious questions about the article's authorship.

Kinyamateka also attempted to draw political links between PARMEHUTU and the MRND. In one article it argued:

"The MDR resembles the MRND (National Revolutionary Movement for Development). One is the cousin of the other. The only difference is that the MRND is filled with extremists and infiltrated by Inkotanyi and their collaborators."

Another article, entitled *These Are Not Times for Games*, was attributed to Nkurikiyimana J. and published in *Kinyamateka* No. 1344 in April 1991.

The article opened by addressing readers:

"Dear readers of Kinyamateka, greetings. The singer has said that these are difficult times. Every morning during Mass, the priest prays, 'Lord, grant peace in these troubled times.'"

It then urged readers to pray for "lasting peace," but not a peace based on fear, weakness, or coercion.

The article went further by warning Hutu readers against embracing multiparty democracy. It questioned the value of democracy itself, arguing that what many called democracy merely served the interests of selfish politicians.

Readers who had experienced both the pre-independence monarchy and the republican governments were encouraged to preserve what they considered good from the past while rejecting what they regarded as harmful.

In discussing democracy, the article acknowledged the common definition that "democracy is government by the people," but immediately emphasized the rule of the majority.

Perhaps the most revealing passage concerned ethnicity. The author wrote that both Hutu and Tutsi forget history too easily. He claimed that Tutsi had forgotten centuries of what he described as Hutu oppression under the monarchy and had also forgotten that the 1959 Revolution had occurred because of their own actions. At the same time, he warned Hutu never to forget that, in his view, the Tutsi would continue seeking to regain political power.

The article concluded that the Hutu majority remained the greatest guarantee that this would never happen.

Such language did more than express political opinion. It reinforced historical grievances, deepened ethnic suspicion, and encouraged readers to view politics primarily through an ethnic lens.

What made these publications particularly influential was that they appeared in a newspaper owned by the Catholic Church. References to presidential statements were presented with an authority that many readers associated with religious teaching itself. As a result, political rhetoric gained additional credibility among sections of the population.

As the Liberation Struggle intensified after October 1990, the tone of Rwanda's media became increasingly radical. Newspapers no longer merely reported political events. Some became active participants in shaping public opinion, encouraging ethnic hostility, and preparing society for violence.

As Rwanda descended deeper into political conflict, extremist media became increasingly influential. Among the most notorious publications was *Kangura*, a newspaper widely believed to have received support from senior military officers, officials of the CDR and MRND, and members of the country's intelligence services, including Lieutenant Colonel Anatole Nsengiyumva and Protais Zigiranyirazo, among others.

Because of its close relationship with influential figures within the government, *Kangura* often appeared to have advance knowledge of political and military strategies before they became public. The newspaper became one of the principal vehicles through which hatred was normalized and violence was encouraged.

Many of its publications openly promoted ethnic division. One of the most infamous examples appeared in Issue No. 6, published in December 1990, under the title "**The Ten Hutu Commandments.**"

These so-called commandments instructed every Hutu to avoid any relationship with Tutsi. Any Hutu who maintained close personal, professional, or social ties with a Tutsi was portrayed as a traitor to the Hutu cause.

The article became one of the clearest examples of media being used to institutionalize discrimination and encourage ordinary citizens to view their neighbors through the lens of ethnicity rather than shared citizenship.

Another article, published on February 9, 1991, carried the headline:

"Let us identify the Inkotanyi (their collaborators [ibiyitso]) and exterminate them."

The message left little room for interpretation. Rather than encouraging political debate, it openly called for identifying and eliminating those labeled as enemies.

The rhetoric became even more extreme over time.

In March 1993, *Kangura*, Issue No. 54, claimed that the RPF possessed a list of 1,600 people it intended to kill should it take power. The article then appeared to encourage preemptive violence, warning that "the enemy's collaborators are well known" and suggesting that the Inkotanyi themselves would ultimately be exterminated.

Another issue, *Kangura* No. 32, entitled "**Hutu, What Is Your Choice?**", reminded readers of the events of the 1959 Revolution. It urged Hutu to unite against what it described as the nation's enemy—the Tutsi.

On March 31, 1992, in Issue No. 34, *Kangura* even ranked political parties according to those it believed Hutu should support. It placed the Coalition for the Defence of the Republic (CDR), which called itself "The Hope of the Hutu," at the top of its list, followed by the MRND. Opposition parties such as the MDR were portrayed as allies of the Inkotanyi. The article concluded with a Kinyarwanda proverb roughly meaning that those who intend to kill a dog first block its nose, a metaphor implying that an opponent must first be weakened before being destroyed.

By January 1994, *Kangura* had become even more explicit. In Issue No. 54, Hasan Ngeze praised speeches that, in his view, had united the Hutu population. The newspaper celebrated its

own contribution to mobilizing Hutu youth, declaring with pride that history would remember the role it had played.

Another article asked:

"Will the Inkotanyi fight? Let them fight. Let it be sweat rather than blood. But first, let the Tutsi be warned to flee."

Such language reflected an atmosphere in which threats against an entire ethnic group had become increasingly normalized in public discourse.

While newspapers played a significant role, radio proved to be an even more powerful instrument of mass mobilization.

The establishment of **Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM)** marked a turning point in the use of broadcast media. Although officially presented as an independent radio station, RTLM increasingly functioned as a platform for spreading ethnic hatred and preparing the population for violence.

Its broadcasts consistently portrayed Tutsi as enemies of the nation while encouraging listeners to fear and distrust them.

Even Radio Rwanda, the country's official state broadcaster, was not entirely free from partisan rhetoric. Long before RTLM became infamous, Radio Rwanda had begun referring to the RPF-Inkotanyi not simply as "Inkotanyi" but as **"Inyangarwanda"**, literally, "enemies of Rwanda"—a label that reinforced the government's portrayal of the movement as a threat to the nation.

During the Genocide against the Tutsi, RTLM assumed an even more direct role. It encouraged attacks against Tutsi civilians, broadcast inflammatory propaganda, and, in many instances, provided information about where victims were hiding or where militias should direct their operations. Its broadcasts became part of the machinery through which genocide was carried out.

The media is often described as the **Fourth Estate** because of its enormous influence over public opinion and national life. In Rwanda, however, sections of the media abandoned that responsibility. Rather than informing society, they became instruments of political extremism, helping transform hatred into organized violence.

Following the Genocide against the Tutsi, Rwanda faced the difficult task of rebuilding not only its institutions but also its media. Journalism carried the burden of restoring public trust, promoting reconciliation, and contributing to national unity.

Significant progress has been made since then. New legal and professional standards have been introduced, and the media has increasingly embraced its responsibility to inform rather than divide. Yet the lessons of history remain clear.

The Rwandan experience demonstrates that journalism is never merely about reporting events. Words have consequences. Headlines shape opinions. Broadcasts influence decisions. When the media is guided by truth and responsibility, it can strengthen democracy and promote peace. When it becomes an instrument of hatred and manipulation, it can contribute to the destruction of an entire nation.

The history of Rwanda serves as a lasting reminder that freedom of expression carries with it an equally profound responsibility: to protect human dignity, promote truth, and ensure that the media is never again used as a weapon against humanity.