

Africa:

Hate Media - Peace Media

By Julienne Munyaneza

For decades, Africa has been known to be a continent of conflicts of all kinds. I don't have to tell you about it, this is common knowledge. It is also known that there are similarities in the causes behind those conflicts but also big differences.

Here are some examples: power or rather struggle for power (most of our leaders on the continent want to stay in power, they hang on to it even when constitutionally their term has ended and they have nothing more to contribute to the development of their country and to the well-being of their people, and they don't care who gets hurt in the process!).

To achieve this (I mean to stay in power), they rule with the so-called iron-fist and complicate the situation by introducing indirect conflicts which cannot be traced back to them but which involve more people. Here I am referring to tribalism/racism or ethnicity, regionalism, nepotism, religion, you can add to the list. In the whole process, they use different tools like bribery/corruption, blackmailing, scapegoating, detention, misuse of judicial power and law (change of constitution to suit their interests). There are also arranged accidents, threats, etc. And as you also know many such situations end up in national insecurities and instabilities which lead to wars and in extreme cases, to genocide like Rwanda.

Think of what happened and is still happening in ex-Zaire now the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), or in my country Rwanda (but I will come to that in a moment), think of Kenya, Burundi and Togo and their aborted democracies, what about Congo Brazzaville, look at Sierra Leone, Liberia, Niger

and Nigeria, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Angola, Ethiopia/Eritrea, etc. I don't want to talk about the situation in North Africa, especially Algeria, the conflict situation there is also unique. All this is really sad. And by the way, power is always linked to riches, money, thousands of acres of land, mansions inside the country and abroad, bank accounts in Zürich, etc. Just a small clique of people benefit from the economy of the country and the rest are rotting in misery (excuse the term but most of you know what I mean).

Where do the Media come in?

In most African countries, the mass media especially broadcasting (radio and television where it exists) more than the press, are government-owned and controlled. You know what that



Julienne Munyaneza is a Rwandan citizen. Presently she is living in London and works for the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) as the Co-ordinator for Africa & Middle East

entails. The mass media are made to serve as the mouthpiece of the leadership. Nothing goes without their permission. Censorship is at its highest. What else would you expect?

But the most common trend and most worrying aspect of it all lies in the fact that, those media are manipulated into serving as instruments of political and ideological propaganda. This goes without saying. The electronic media in particular are in some cases fashioned into tools of terror, as was the case in Uganda during Idi Amin's dictatorship who used radio to maintain his reign of terror. And the most recent example is of course the 'hate radio' also known as the 'killing radio', la Radio/Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) du Rwanda. Somehow Christine L. Kellow and H. Leslie Steeves argue along the same line that 'The government seeks to use its power over the media to exhort its citizens to greater effort and at the same time prevent the media either from questioning policy or being sufficiently critical of political authority'. (Kellow & Steeves, 1998, p. 115-6).

Unfortunately, in such cases, journalists find themselves faced with a big dilemma. They either participate actively in the government affairs or associate themselves with the leadership in place and allow themselves to be used by the politicians, by agreeing with them and supporting them all the way without comment. Or in rare cases, they may decide to make responsible judgements and stand up for reason and tell the truth, thus risking their very lives. You know for sure of journalists who were either detained or at the very worst assassinated or lynched for having disagreed with or contradicted the leadership. Examples are many in Rwanda, Algeria and elsewhere, even in the so-called developed countries!

With the introduction of the multiparty system, there is always a proliferation, a mushrooming of newspapers but unfortunately these are always full of a political party's ideology, and do nothing else than criticise the other(s).

Allow me to single out radio and say a few words about its impact in Africa. Many of you know that radio is still the most effective communication medium in Africa. It is the medium of the people, even those living in the remotest areas. Statistics tell us that more than 50% of the Black African population can neither read nor write. Oral communication still prevails in many societies. Of course the rate changes from country to country.

I have come to agree with Loraine Sweeney that in rural areas (she was referring to Rwanda but the same could be said of any other country), where „illiteracy predominates, radio propaganda is particularly powerful as people only understand information broadcast in their own language (here Kinyarwanda)“. (Sweeney, 1997, p.14). In cities, the attitude is different because the urban dwellers gain another point of view from different sources, other international radios, denied to the rural population who can only listen to the broadcasts in the local language. And the tragedy is that such 'Listeners tend to conceive the radio as literally the government itself speaking'. (Kellow & Steeves, 1998, p. 116). Did you know that in many African countries, people (men especially!) take their radio sets to the fields, to drinking places, markets and other meeting places? Did you know that radio is the first personal belonging people take with them when they flee a situation of crisis? And as I have mentioned earlier, African leaders have long recognised the impact of radio, and in many cases, the population takes the broadcast messages of their leaders as a law in itself to be obeyed blindly.

To have such a faithful audience can be beneficial if messages are positive and constructive, but

The 10 Hutu commandments

These so-called 10 Hutu commandments were first published on Dec. 10, 1990 by KANGURA. From its inception till the time it was destroyed, RTLM broadcasted them repeatedly:

1. Every Muhutu should know that a Mututsi woman, wherever she is, works for the interest of her Tutsi ethnic group. As a result, we shall consider a traitor any Muhutu who:

- * marries a Tutsi woman,
- * befriends a Tutsi woman,
- * employs a Tutsi woman as a secretary or a concubine.

2. Every Muhutu should know that our Hutu daughters are more suitable and conscientious in their role as woman, wife and mother of the family. Are they not beautiful, good secretaries and more honest?

3. Bahutu women, be vigilant and try to bring your husbands, brothers and sons back to reason.

4. Every Muhutu should know that every Mututsi is dishonest in business. His only aim is the supremacy of his ethnic group. As a result, any Muhutu who does the following is a traitor:

- * makes a partnership with Batutsi in business,
- * invests his money or the government's money in a Tutsi enterprise,
- * lends or borrows money for a Mututsi,
- * gives favours to Batutsi in business (obtaining import licences, bank loans, construction sites, public markets...).

5. All strategic positions, political, administrative, economic, military and security should be entrusted to Bahutu.

6. The education sector (school pupils, students, teachers) must be majority Bahutu.

7. The Rwandese Armed Forces should be exclusively Hutu. The experience of the October [1990] war has taught us a lesson. No member of the military shall marry a Tutsi.

8. The Bahutu should stop having mercy on the Batutsi.

9. The Bahutu, wherever they are, must have unity and solidarity, and be concerned with the fate of their Hutu brothers.

* The Bahutu inside and outside Rwanda must constantly look for friends and allies for the Hutu cause, starting with their Bantu brothers;

* They must constantly counteract the Tutsi propaganda;

* The Bahutu must be firm and vigilant against their common Tutsi enemy.

10. The Social Revolution of 1959, the Referendum of 1961, and the Hutu Ideology, must be taught to every Muhutu at every level. Every Hutu must spread this ideology widely. Any Muhutu who persecutes his brother Muhutu for having read, spread and taught this ideology, is a traitor.

also dangerously fatal if messages are destructive like the case of Rwanda. That's why the language used in the media, whether on radio or in newspapers, plays on people's psychology and feelings. Journalists know how to choose their words, full of imagery, describing, comparing, demonising, denouncing, inciting, insulting, poisoning, undermining, etc. They completely forget their code of conduct and media ethics.

Why what happened in Rwanda did happen that way?

It is not because 'all the devils met in Rwanda' as one British paper put it in 1994, but because of some egoistic and selfish people who never valued other people's life as their own, and loved power and money more than people.

Power-hungry people who did not want and would not admit that the time to share power and money had finally come. People who would not accept defeat even when it was obvious. And ironically in war like in love, all weapons are allowed.

Rwanda (and Burundi for that matter), was before 1994 and still is a typical rural country. Both countries have a history full of periodical and repetitive upheavals. Whatever happens in one affects the other deeply, and vice-versa. We are the same people, we have the same culture, speak the same language, have had common colonial masters, etc. But while the Rwandan genocide shook the world by its intensity in just three months, the Burundian killings have been going on for decades, no one can even guess how many Burundians have perished because of their ethnic group.

The 1994 genocide in Rwanda has been called a media war, why? Because 56% of the Rwandan population are or were illiterate, because Rwandans come from a hierarchical background where authorities were obeyed without flinching or questioning, and definitely because the government and the opposition 'transformed media into macro-agenda-setting tools with an agenda of ethnic hatred'. (Kellow & Steeves, 1998, p. 116). Not to allow the language used by *RTL* and some journals like *Kangura* (to wake Hutus up) get at you was just a miracle. I will give one example only, the Hutu 10 commandments. In broad terms, if you were a Hutu, you were incited to defend your honour through violent acts and brutality, as a Tutsi you were made to feel undesirable, a dangerous insect, a cockroach to be crushed, an enemy. The genocide in Rwanda found a ready, fertile ground. The majority of the population was angry, insecure, very poor, while a few hundreds were living in opulence. People were hungry for a change, any change. That's why they participated body and soul in the killings. How else do you explain a man killing his wife and children and vice-versa, just because the radio tells them so? No way! (See the copy of the 10 Hutu commandments on the previous page).

What about the Churches?

In Rwanda there have been claims that the Churches allowed the conflict to get out of control by their silence. It has even been proved, I am pained to say, that most of the Church leaders, whether Catholic or Protestant, because of their involvement with and support of the former regime, were unable to speak out against its excesses and evil doings.



Source: L'autre Afrique 4/5 1999

Many church people, priests, nuns, pastors and bishops, have been accused of having participated in the killings. Some are even languishing in prisons like any other criminals, others are living in exile.

While it would be an exaggeration to label church leaders as the initiators of the conflict, one wonders however what the outcome of the conflict would have been if the Churches had played a prophetic role – by being at the forefront, denouncing evil and wrong-doings of the politicians, by speaking out against discrimination and bigotry, by making declarations, giving warnings to their people and inter-preting the political messages through civic education, for the Christians. As a consequence of their compromising passivity,

the Churches are currently struggling to wash off the stigma of some of their sectors for having turned a blind eye to the 1994 genocide and having colluded with a murderous government. They are now involved in peace building, trauma counselling and healing, and reconciliation programmes.

Peace and the Media

Do peace media exist? What are they? How do they function? In other words, can the media play a positive constructive role especially in Africa?

They definitely can. But unfortunately, we think of the positive role of the media, a curative one, after conflicts have destroyed people's lives and the socio-economic fabric of a nation is torn in pieces. Following what happened and is still happening in the Great Lakes Region and in other

sub-regions on the continent, *WACC* in collaboration with other partners launched a very interesting programme targeting armed conflict and other critical situations with special emphasis on the role of the media. I know also for sure that *PANOS* Institute is doing the same. Under this programme, radio broadcasts in Rwanda, focusing on reconciliation, trauma healing, peaceful cohabitation, forgiveness, love, etc. have been supported through the Council of Churches. Church-owned or related newsletters *BATISSONS - LET'S BUILD TOGETHER* trying to bring together through reconciliation and forgiveness Tutsis and Hutus; *TALK I'M LISTENING* which addresses issues related to women who were subjected to all kinds of abuse during the genocide, have been and are still published. In Burundi, *LOVE EACH OTHER* radio programmes and newsletters are being produced. The *MEDIATOR* magazine is published in English, French for the whole Great Lakes Region putting a special emphasis on personal testimonies which show that peaceful cohabitation is still possible, and many more.

We have also supported a consultation on „The role of traditional/cultural ways of communication e.g. dance, music, poetry, drama/theatre...) and the search for common values“ in Burundi and Rwanda. Media can promote common values instead of focusing on the differences. You will be surprised to see how effective these are in bringing together people who otherwise should be fighting each other. When we dance or sing, in Rwanda and Burundi, you could not tell who is who because we dance the same, sing the same. And when we sing or dance, or dramatise a story, we are one.

At that particular consultation, the following topics were addressed:

- The role of traditional communications in building a culture of peace;
- The concepts of music and dance for peace;
- Education to the culture of peace in Rwanda and Burundi with references to traditional values;
- How to integrate church music in the process of peace-building;
- Poetry, story-telling and theatre in conflict resolution and reconciliation in both countries.

WACC would like to make these kind of activities an ongoing priority because they involve people from all fields of life, from grassroots to the educated groups.

At the continental level, *WACC-AFRICA REGION (WACC-AR)* has started holding a series of seminars on *The role of the media in building a culture of peace and stability in Africa*. The launching seminar took place in Kigali in March 1999 and participants came from Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC. Unfortunately nobody represented Congo Brazzaville. The next one will be in West Africa. Liberia and Sierra Leone will be among the participating countries. In the year 2000, we plan to hold two meetings: one for the Horn of Africa and Eastern Africa, the other for Southern Africa involving Angola, Mozambique and the rest.

‘We believe that in focusing our media initiatives on conflict resolution and prevention, we will, however humbly, help towards the realisation of the prophet Isaiah’s dream of a world devoid of war-mongering and sabre-rattling - no matter how long it takes’. (*WACC-AR Magazine, Beacon*). And by the way, if we need peace media, we also need peace-making, peace-building and mediating journalists. And I am convinced that this is feasible but we need to work together, all of us.

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