

Allan Thompson, Ed. *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*. London: Pluto Press, 2007. 463 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$29.95. Paper.

The hate radio station Radio Télévision Milles Collines (RTLM) was like “the voice of the devil” (18), a “conversation among Rwandans who knew each other well” (44), “the sole source of authority for interpreting [news]’ meaning” (125), “bullets in a gun” (293), a “textbook case of broadcasting genocide” (308), and “quotidian” (108).

In this absorbing collection of essays on the role of domestic and international media in the Rwanda genocide, perhaps the only shared perspective among contributors is the horror of the genocide itself. Controversies about the role and the impact of the media emerge through lively disagreements about audiences’ reactions, journalists’ responsibilities, and media’s legal and political impact. Editor Allan Thompson assembles an unrivaled group of experts who closely observed, produced, and prosecuted media related to the Rwandan genocide.

After introductory statements, notably one from Romeo Dallaire describing his interactions with Rwandan and international media as head of UNAMIR, Part One focuses on Rwandan hate media. With characteristically scrupulous research, Alison Des Forges justifies Human Rights Watch’s call to jam RTLM based on its links with assassinations and massacres. Other chapters analyze archived broadcasts and articles to show that RTLM and the newspaper *Kangura* “...incited [people] to mass murder” (122). By comparison, chapters presenting data from Rwandans’ perspectives make more moderated claims. Jean-Marie Higiho, director of Rwandan Information until April 1994, limits the influence of the tumultuous Rwandan press he was assigned to observe to Kigali elites. Daryl Li and Charles Mironko use anthropological interviews with confessed prisoners to argue that Rwandans were not passive receptacles of RTLM broadcasts, and that RTLM was among many factors that reinforced and normalized face to face calls to violence.

Part Two examines the international media. Most of the section reverberates with journalists’ explanations and excoriations of the lack of coverage and understanding of the Rwandan genocide. Pieces that stand apart are Mark Doyle’s straightforward account of his struggle to cover the genocide from Kigali, and Lindsay Hilsum’s report on the tight-knit and dysfunctional relationship between international media and aid agencies in the context of the Goma refugee crisis. Steven Livingston, an academic, advances the most heretical argument of the book—that media coverage has no effect on international policy. This so-called realist account of international relations does not amass enough data ultimately to convince, but it is an antidote to some contributors’ assumption that “but for ...” (disinterested editors, squeamish audiences, lack of video footage, etc.), international political responses to the genocide would have been different.

This latter claim about the power of international media is particularly questionable in the shadow of the current Darfur genocide (which the book rarely mentions). In his conclusion, Thompson claims that (traditional) media also ignored Darfur, but he himself ignores the role of the Internet in promoting Darfur information and activism. Moreover, no contributor points to the larger contradiction that, despite

media and governmental proclamations of genocide (in contrast to “definitional dancing” in Rwanda), little has been accomplished to stop the violence in Sudan (Straus 2005).

Part Three centers on the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda’s (ICTR) prosecution of Rwandan hate media, or the “Media Trial.” Thompson reprints the ICTR’s lucid, path breaking summary judgment, after which lawyers from the prosecution, defense, and outside organizations comment. Simone Monasebian of the prosecution argues fluently for the importance of considering the media in context, while Jean-Marie Biju-Duval rests his defense on precedents established at Nuremburg. Bianafor Nowrojee critiques the prosecution for repeatedly downgrading sexual violence to a low priority.

Part Four outlines strategies for media training, monitoring, and intervention to prevent violence. Philippe Dahinden of Fondation Hironnelle describes the philosophy and enterprise of broadcasting accurate news and other types of “peace media” (e.g., entertainment-education soap operas) in fragile and conflict states. Also notable is Lars Waldorf’s meticulously researched and damning review of continuing government censorship and propaganda in present day Rwanda.

A recurring question haunts this book: how does one *prove* media impact? Moreover, *how* do media impact individuals, neighborhoods, and societies? Law does not always require proof of media’s impact, but when it does, it has portrayed humans in an extremely passive light, drawing on the Nuremberg claim that media propaganda was like an “injection of poison.” Academic research rejects this “hypodermic needle” model of media influence, and social scientists like me wince at one advocate’s claim that “the strong correlation [between media propaganda and sexual violence] indicates causation” (367). Nuanced academic accounts based on interviews with Rwandans (Mironko and Li; Straus and Karnell cited in Chalk’s chapter) complicate the role of media but leave many questions dangling. I wished for more skepticism about media’s impact, particularly when contributors recommended media interventions. For example: How can broadcasters attract attention to accurate news reports when scandal and stereotyping is more seductive? What types of media are most powerful for shaping or reinforcing *positive* norms and behavior? If *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide* poses many hypotheses, future research will have to test them.

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