

# Rwanda: a question of

... by William Bird and Sandra Roberts

*There is no doubt that media freedom is essential for a functioning democracy, but it can be extremely difficult to realise and protect in a country where media have been used as a key tool of repression. Rwanda's recent violent history provides a powerful argument for media monitoring.*

In 1994 the campaign of ethnic cleansing in Rwanda took less than 100 days but left 800 000 people dead. The genocide was preceded and encouraged by hate media against Tutsis. During the genocide a radio station went further than stereotyping and told the aggressors where to find Tutsis, and then to kill them. Although the media cannot be considered responsible for the genocide, the Rwanda media failed to act as a safeguard against the tragedy. Unlike other instances where media have been used as a tool for propaganda, Rwanda highlighted the extreme power of the media.<sup>1</sup> In addition to this, was the failure by the overwhelming majority of international media to engage the international community in efforts to prevent or limit the genocide. In the words of Al-

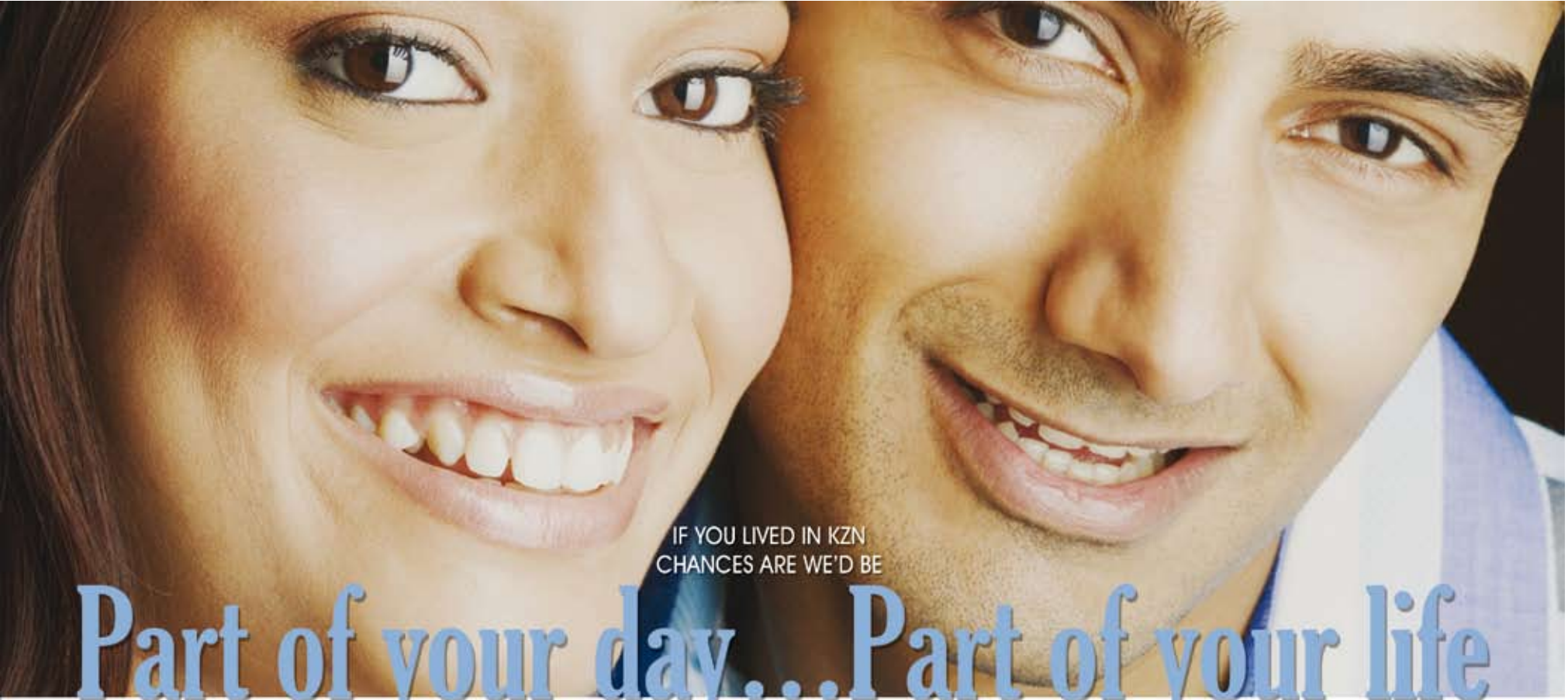
len Thompson: "Confronted by Rwanda's horrors, western news media for the most part turned away, then muddled the story when they did pay attention. And hate media organs in Rwanda – through their journalists, broadcasters and media executives – played an instrumental role in laying the groundwork for genocide, then actively participated in the extermination campaign."<sup>2</sup>

The role of the many media can be seen as either actively complicit in the genocide or failing in their fundamental role to inform people and give voice to the voiceless. This experience has understandably resulted in a great deal of scepticism about media among some sections of Rwandan society and, more importantly, about the pre-eminence and value of media freedom.

In addition to the fear and mistrust, there is now also a clear desire to ensure that the media plays a positive role in nation-building and opposing ethnic divisions. While such a discourse may be positive and necessary, it may also pose a significant threat to media freedom if media do not wish to adopt the nation-building discourse.

Media credibility in Rwanda is low. Again this situation is not unique as, according to a number of sources, "media credibility ratings for the major broadcast and cable television outlets [worldwide] have fallen somewhat in recent years."<sup>3</sup> But for the media to fulfil their responsibilities in Rwanda it is imperative that they can be trusted by the public. In such a context, the potential to limit media freedom in the name of building credible media that acts in the national interest is great.

According to Waldorf: "After taking power in 1994, the Rwandan Patriotic Front retooled the previous regime's information agency and the official media to disseminate its own propaganda. As under the previous regime, the government has promoted private media outlets to create a facade of media pluralism. At the same time, the RPF has successfully suppressed or co-opted independent journals and accused independent journalists of inciting ethnic 'divisionism' and even genocidal ideology.



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# credibility and quality

As a result, there is less press freedom and media pluralism in Rwanda today than there was before the genocide.”<sup>4</sup>

The Media Monitoring Project’s experience in Rwanda suggests that, like many other emerging democracies, quality journalism and media freedom are a work in progress. As outsiders, it is incredibly difficult to fully comprehend the depth of distrust and fear created by the genocide, particularly as many trials for those responsible are still in progress. The discourse repeatedly identified in Rwandan media is overwhelmingly one of unity, talking only of one Rwandan people.

Given local and international trends at play in Rwanda, it seems that challenges to journalism that upholds democracy are immense but structural interventions are in place to support the media sector in Rwanda.

## Where to from here?

There is no formula for media freedom, but a process has started in Rwanda. A combination of putting structures in place to encourage and support media freedom as well as media monitoring in support of human rights is moving Rwanda in the right direction. It is important that Rwandans are made more aware of the positive role media can play in rebuilding democracy, and human rights-based media monitoring and self-regulation assist this process.

The enormous job of prosecuting those involved in the genocide, and a realisation that it would be almost impossible to identify and convict all those involved, contribute to a culture of fear in the power of the media and those who claim to be independent journalists. This climate can be used to further the interests of those who wish to suppress media freedom for their own purposes. However, there are indications that the country is moving to support greater media freedom. Rwanda now has an independent institution which has been tasked with promoting freedom of the press. The High Council of the Press (HCP) was established in 2002. A code of conduct for the media<sup>5</sup> has also been debated and agreed on by media practitioners.

MMP worked together with Rwandans to make the code a reality. At a meeting between HCP and MMP a draft code was drawn up based on best practice African and international codes. The draft was developed and finalised by an elected task team of media practitioners. In 2005, during a media workshop organised by the HCP in conjunction with the Press House. Over 300 media practitioners have since signed and adopted this code. The open process in which the code was developed and adopted serves to restore some credibility to the Rwandan media. Having a code that is public, and a mechanism for members of the public to submit complaints, is a critical step. It also demonstrates a common commitment to key journalistic principles.

In spite of the attempts to make the code and regulation as democratic as possible, there have been reports of media freedom being limited by the use of laws punishing incitement to discrimination or divisionism. “The law also requires journalists to reveal their sources on demand from the judicial organs (including, presumably, the judicial police). Finally, the law created the High Council of the Press, under the Office of the President, which accredits journalists and advises the government on censorship.”<sup>6</sup> This underscores and provides further justification for independent media monitoring.

MMP has worked in Rwanda building media monitoring capacity since 2002, using a human rights approach. MMP has formed a solid relationship with the media monitoring team in Rwanda, training them on media monitoring around gender, children, elections and broader media monitoring. An inclusive view of human rights necessarily includes issues of freedom of the media and expression, gender<sup>7</sup>, ethnicity<sup>8</sup>, and children. Media monitoring from a human rights perspective consequently has the advantage of making it very difficult to use the results to limit media freedom. It is also inherently a tool to encourage better media practice, as comparisons can be drawn between different media, rather than between a country’s media and an ideal.

It is possible, using media monitoring, to identify quality and diversity markers such as a diversity of sources, regional coverage and gender. Thematic media monitoring means that particular human rights areas can be explored in-depth. To ensure buy-in and support for such media monitoring however, it is important that issues are contextualised and that where possible local codes or guidelines are used to set the standards. The Rwandan press code, along with human rights principles, forms a solid basis for independent, comparative media monitoring in Rwanda.

In support of the commonly-agreed code and process for complaints, monitoring the media can also be used to help encourage ethical journalism, and credibility. Media monitoring enables common trends to be identified, be it the kinds of stories covered, the limit or diversity within each subject, who speaks and what the key messages are.

Three of the key commonly accepted ethical principles of journalism that can be found in the Rwandan media code as well as numerous other media codes are:

- To seek the truth and report it as fully as possible,
- To act independently, and
- To minimise harm<sup>9</sup>.

Media monitoring can be used to highlight best practice in each of these principles.

If there is diversity in news, in terms of stories, sources, places and subjects, there is a greater chance that news will be more fully reported. By monitoring the kinds of information provided, as well as the fairness of stories, there is a greater chance of stories being more accurately reported. Similarly, by monitoring how sources and subjects are portrayed, monitoring can identify where the media has attempted or failed to prevent harm. For example, identifying a rape survivor where she did not give permission is not an attempt to minimise harm. In addition, perpetuating nega-

tive stereotypes about particular ethnicities can be tracked through media monitoring. In terms of acting independently, it should be emphasised that media monitoring should be only one component of a comprehensive strategy aimed at protecting and promoting ethical practice.

Other components may include skills development of journalists and targeted training. The further development and implementation of a complaints process would also be informed by monitoring. In addition, general media literacy campaigns to enable citizens to critically engage with media would help build a more informed public.

There is of course a flip side to the power of monitoring – that it may be used to regulate and limit media freedom. The trends and findings may be used to target individual journalists and media, or those who wish to offer different views and opinions. Ironically, if there is abuse of media freedom it will be seen in monitoring. Monitoring will provide the necessary evidence if over time there are the following trends: a worrying similarity in different media; key messages are the same; different opinions and people are not heard; and certain voices dominate without reason over others. Provided the monitoring is made available to members of the public, it will enable those in authority to be challenged, as well as alert civil society in the fight for media freedom.

As long as the monitoring is driven by a human rights framework this should always be the case. What cannot however be guaranteed, is the independence of those responsible for the media monitoring. If independence is threatened or undermined, the results may not be reliable even if made available to members of the public. It is then up to civil society and government to ensure the independence of those monitoring is restored and protected.

This discussion and the conclusions drawn are also in line with the four recommendations put forward by Allen Thompson in his report on media and the Rwandan genocide<sup>10</sup>:

1. Media in vulnerable societies should be monitored.
2. There should be greater collaboration between media organisations and conflict resolution organisations.
3. Media organisations need to build a better case for monitoring and early intervention and encourage appropriate donor support.
4. A systematic review of media behaviour in vulnerable societies should be conducted.

Media monitoring could have identified and highlighted problems in Rwandan media in 1994, and it can continue to challenge the lack of press freedom and highlight human rights issues today.

## Endnotes

1. See also the summary judgement of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). Available on the ICTR website, [www.icttr.org](http://www.icttr.org).
2. Thompson A. (ed) 2007. *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*. Pluto Press: London: 4.
3. See, <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?PageID=838>, as well as [http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/narrative\\_overview\\_publicattitudes.asp](http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/narrative_overview_publicattitudes.asp)
4. Waldorf L in Thompson A. (ed) 2007. *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*. Pluto Press: London: 154.
5. Journalists and Media Code of Deontology in Rwanda, May 2005.
6. Waldorf L in Thompson A. (ed) 2007. *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*. Pluto Press: London: 155.
7. In the prosecutions against genocide participants, rape has been recognised as a crime against humanity.
8. The discourse of national unity in Rwanda means a reluctance to address issues of ethnicity.
9. From Bob Steele, Poynter Institute.
10. Thompson A. (ed) 2007. *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*. Pluto Press: London: 152.

Since writing the article a currently unnamed bill on the media has been submitted to the Rwandan parliament for debate. The bill, similar to the South African Films and Publications Amendment Bill, if passed poses significant threats to media freedom in Rwanda, as it requires all journalists to be registered, and involves direct regulation of the media by the state in ways that can be used to limit media freedom.

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