

African Media Portrayals of the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi

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Much has been written about the media coverage of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. However, with few exceptions, much of this work has often focused on how the journalism fields from the global North framed the genocide, with little work on how African fields covered it. This article eschews the global North and investigates how African fields covered the genocide as it unfolded. We analyze 96 news articles from Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria, along with 21 transcripts of Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) coverage during the first month of the genocide. We find similar narratives about the violence between RTLM broadcasts and the 3 fields we focus on. For example, we find that in the period of intense violence, African journalists primarily framed Rwanda as a civil war and ethnic conflict and rarely used the genocide frame. This is counterintuitive when considering how many fields from the global North have been critiqued for not calling Rwanda a genocide early on. Our findings and conclusions hold implications for comparative media analysis and the normalization of hateful rhetoric.

Keywords: genocide, journalism field, South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, RTLM

The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi (hereafter genocide) created shockwaves throughout the African continent and beyond. Media organizations, both within and outside the region, reported on the violence in real time, describing it differently by time and space, reflecting cloudy information, long-held stereotypes about Africans and conflict in Africa, and deliberate misinformation attempts (Alozie, 2010; Bond, 2019; Myers, Klak, & Koehl, 1996). This article seeks to make sense of this varied reporting, focusing on African media organizations from three African countries and broadcasts from Rwanda's infamous *genocidaire* radio station, Radio Télévision Libres des Mille Collins (RTLM). Scholarship on how this genocide was framed has primarily focused on the global North (see Fair & Parks, 2001; Myers et al., 1996; Thompson, 2007); with few exceptions, scholars have not focused on how it was covered in Africa (see

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Alozie, 2010). Subsequently, we know more about how the *New York Times* covered the genocide than how the *Mail & Guardian* and *Vanguard* covered it.

Even when some have attempted to study journalism in Africa, there is an assumption that if the profession does not mirror its global North counterpart, it is lacking and needs “capacity building.” Nevertheless, as we see in the current milieu of the profession in the global North, the ills African journalism is routinely accused of espousing have shown up in the global North (Benkler, Faris, Roberts, & Zuckerman, 2017; Faris et al., 2017; Phillips, 2015, 2018; Watts & Rothschild, 2017). Our approach here is less about the profession’s capability but rather to argue that it engages in knowledge construction, which needs to be taken seriously by journalism scholars.

Media organizations provide spaces for consensus-building, debate, and the consumption of knowledge. This process is influenced by factors such as collective memory (Zelizer, 2011), global and local scripts (Boyle, 2002), and power hierarchies (Fanon, 1968), all of which act as boundaries of normativity. However, despite this, we have seen a need for more scholarship focusing on how African journalists enact these processes when narrating phenomena in neighboring countries. Most of the scholarship on media representations has focused on how the global North produces knowledge on the global South, especially during moments of conflict. From this strand, we have learned of the tendency to “barbarize” actors and conflicts in Africa (Atkinson, 1999a, 1999b). Fair and Parks (2021) inform us that the coverage of Rwanda by the United States sought to define refugees as “problems” that were the “vulgar antithesis of western norms” (p. 49).

Citing work by Fair (1994, p. 36), Myers et al. (1996) argued that the insistence on tribalizing the genocide by media from the United States ensured that Rwanda was framed as “both exotic and comfortably distant in U.S. readers’ minds” (p. 43). However, Chaon’s (2007) analysis of how media from the global North covered Rwanda alerts us to the tensions between journalists on the ground and editors in the global North. Specifically, Chaon (2007) laments the gatekeeping function of editors (pp. 161–164). Although this work has been significant, studies like ours that focus exclusively on African representations are a more recent focus (e.g., Alozie, 2005, 2010; Mody, 2010; Ray, 2009).

Building on this work, this article is grounded on Weber’s (1976) call to study the press and on Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) and Merton’s (1968) exposition of both the contextual nature of knowledge and the limits and opportunities this contextual nature presents. It is at the intersection of two strands of sociological scholarship that on the influence of global scripts on local knowledge production (see Frank, Hironaka, & Schofer, 2000) and that on the impact of nation-specific contextual and institutional realities (see Hadler & Haller, 2011; Haller & Hadler, 2008). It is among an emerging body of sociological scholarship that examines how African actors speak and construct knowledge about Africa and Africans (see Mojola, 2015; Moon, 2021, 2023; Nyseth Nzitatira & Fox, 2017).

Another strand of research in which our work is located is the study of RTLM and its role in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi (Carver, 2000; Higiro, 2007; Mironko, 2007; Straus, 2007). Our work expands on this strand in new ways by putting RTLM in conversations with three of the continent’s most prominent media ecologies. In our analysis of RTLM in conjunction with regional newspaper coverage, we

capture the extent to which genocidal intent was missed because RTLM's messages were constructed in a manner to camouflage the genocide (Chrétien, 2007). Though the architects of RTLM sought to use this platform to spread genocidal ideology specifically, we show how RTLM narratively mirrored news organizations outside of Rwanda covering the genocide through generally accepted narratives of violence. Perpetrators were aware of their audiences, both domestically and internationally. RTLM crafted messages with these multiple audiences in mind, seeking at various points to normalize dehumanization, organize violence, or downplay the government's atrocities and dissuade international intervention. By studying how perpetrators themselves frame violence, we can recognize parallels between RTLM and nonperpetrator framing, thus garnering a deeper understanding of the resonance and power of their messaging.

We are motivated by two interrelated questions. The first focuses on how three significant media ecologies on the continent framed the genocide. Different frames convey distinct messages about intent, causality, and blame, which can, in turn, impact the perception of various audiences (Alozie, 2010; Kothari, 2010; Savelsberg, 2015). Although we disagree that these frames' consumption causally shapes audiences' attitudes, they can influence how actors understand and respond to violence. The second related question is how these three countries compared with RTLM's depiction of killings in the country. We are specifically interested in how propagandistic violence coverage often parallels other media coverage in its frames. Although frequently depicted as outlandish by mainstream sources or in hindsight, our analysis shows that violent narratives are usually couched within widely used and legitimized frames, even when they stem from the perpetrators' voices.

RTLM and the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi

The genocide was the culmination of the anti-Tutsi violence that plagued Rwanda in its postcolonial period. In the early 20th century, Belgian authorities imposed a racialized system of colonial rule, placing members of the Tutsi minority in political and social power positions (Mamdani, 2007). The 1959 revolution marked a power shift, with members of the Hutu majority taking control of the Rwandan state. In the following decades, extremist Hutu political leaders mobilized around the anti-Tutsi sentiment, increasingly marginalizing them within Rwandan society. This conflict came to a head in the early 1990s, when Tutsi rebel forces sought to overtake the Rwandan state. In 1994, extremist Hutu factions within the government seized the state apparatus in a coup and commenced systematic genocide throughout the country (Des Forges, 1995).

Throughout the 1990s, members of this extremist faction spread their messaging through the media. While RTLM's commentary is often prioritized in scholarly analysis, RTLM operated within a media ecology that included print media such as *Kangura* and other radio stations. Although Radio Rwanda technically remained the state's sole station, RTLM was closely aligned with the government, with many of its founders aligned with President Habyarimana's party and social networks. It would often broadcast on the same frequency as Radio Rwanda. With its conversational tone and extensive music library, RTLM made extremist messages widely consumable.

Radio broadcasts, led by the Rwandan State, began calling for violence against Tutsi and the RPF in the early days of the civil war in October 1990 (Des Forges, 1995). Although radio broadcasts reached a

broader audience in Rwanda because of relatively low literacy rates, *Kangura* was an essential influence in standardizing discriminatory messaging among Rwanda's political elite. *Kangura*, along with RTLM, often featured the perspectives of government officials within their programming. Moreover, as mentioned by Richards, Baele, and Coan (2019), RTLM sometimes "directly took content" from *Kangura* (p. 531).

The genocide lasted for 100 days, with RTLM broadcasting regularly about the ongoing violence, often propagating hateful narratives. It informed listeners about the politically moderate Hutu's location and "culpability" during the violence (Des Forges, 1999). The level to which such explicit direction influenced violence was debated in numerous trials at the International Criminal Tribunal on Rwanda (ICTR; Zahar, 2005). Although many scholars and observers have sought to draw causal connections between RTLM broadcasts and violence (see Power, 2001), scholarship has started interrogating RTLM broadcasts' causality during the genocide. Mironko (2007) and Straus (2007), for example, argue that although evidence exists that RTLM did influence hardliners and political elites, most participants attributed their participation in the violence to mobilization by elites and hardliners that had bought into RTLM's message.

In the decades since the genocide, RTLM has been a focal point for extensive academic study (Richards et al., 2019). However, through this vast body of scholarship, academics have drawn RTLM out of the media ecosystem, where it grew to prominence. However, propaganda during a crisis and the phenomena of genocide and mass violence more broadly are not removed from the everyday social world—in contrast, powerful actors orchestrate and enact widescale targeted killing by drawing from existing norms and hierarchies to mobilize ordinary citizens (Browning, 1992). Through our focus on RTLM, we close the gap in this scholarly lens and illustrate how RTLM established prominence not through its exceptionality but through its normalcy, both within Rwandan and the broader African media landscape. Finally, its analysis here is also a question of access. At the time of this writing, getting print media archives as comprehensive as RTLM archives is almost impossible.

African Journalism Fields

We rely on Pierre Bourdieu's (1969, 1993, 1999) field theory as an explanatory mechanism for our results. Field theory argues that organizations (such as news organizations) inhabit an interorganizational news ecology (Cottle, 2004; Usher, 2017). It also allows us to place journalists and organizations in different countries within the same professional universe, while accounting for nation-specific contexts. Accordingly, it enables the study of African organizations as part of a larger fraternity of organizations with similar *logic* (Benson, 2013, p. 25) rather than anomalies that can be meaningfully understood only as flawed versions of organizations in the West. Field theory allows us to locate the media organizations in what Benson (1999) views as their "immediate structural environment" (p. 468), allowing us to highlight the role of social contexts in framing choices.

We treat African news organizations as actors within the global media system whose capacities are shaped "in relation to other organizations" within the national, regional, and global journalism fields (Go, 2008, p. 207)—we are aware that localized political realities also face each field in each country with distinct power hierarchies. As such, field theory allows us to treat the African journalism field as operating like nesting dolls. The larger transnational field contains smaller national and regional fields while simultaneously

being contained within a larger global journalism field. Each level faces different realities and is in tension and discussion with other proximate and distant fields (Lei, 2016).

Subsequently, field theory allows us to place RTLM within a broader continental field with multiple actors struggling to define the unfolding events in varying political and social contexts. Thus, while RTLM was probably the actor that was most visible in the struggle for “various species of capital,” it was also, in conjunction with other actors, “enabled and constrained by the specific configurations of the field and its cultural rules” (Go, 2008, p. 208). At its heart, this study is interested in how this struggle over “various species of capital” (Go, 2008, p. 208) manifested itself through a process of “selection and salience” involved in constructing frames (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

This focus on frames has been beneficial in projects similar to ours, such as Alozie’s (2005, 2010) on Darfur and Rwanda, respectively, and Mody’s (2010) and Ray’s (2009) on Darfur. Alozie’s (2010) work on the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Kenya and Nigeria finds a significant level of frame convergence between the newspapers he studies (which we include in our sample). Alozie’s (2010) argues that both countries were keen on discussing the background and broader implications of the genocide. We find traces of it in the work on Darfur by Mody (2010) and Ray (2009). Mody (2010) finds that South Africa’s coverage of Darfur was more disinterested than Egypt’s and that the greater geographical and “fewer national interest sensitivities” of South Africa compared with Egypt affected how the two countries covered Darfur (p. 163). Ray’s (2009) work presents its key take-home message as the presence of the ethnic conflict frame in the news articles they study.

Finally, our use of field theory is not a transposition of a theory from the global North onto Africa but rather a return to a region where the theory’s fundamentals germinated. As shown by Go (2013), the early seeds of what would be later called “field theory” and its crucial concept of “habitus” are seen in Bourdieu’s early work on colonialism in Algeria (see Bourdieu, 1958).

Methods and Data

We qualitatively analyzed news articles from Kenya’s *The Daily Nation*, South Africa’s *The Sowetan*, and Nigeria’s *The Guardian* during the “high genocide” period in April 1994.¹ This is done concomitantly with an analysis of RTLM broadcasts during the same period, totaling 21 radio transcripts and 96 news articles. The 21 radio broadcasts are from RTLM; of the 96 news articles, 78% were from *The Daily Nation*, 18% from *The Guardian*, and *The Sowetan* only accounted for 4%. These news articles accounts for 32% of news stories published over the past 100 days. We selected every news article and radio broadcast (transcribed in English) between April 6 and May 9. As such, the limited coverage by South Africa is less about our sampling strategy and simply because there was a lack of coverage of Rwanda, possibly because of events unfolding within South Africa during this period.

¹ The focus on a single newspaper in each country is a function of data access challenges. At the time of collection, these were the only newspapers we could access through microfilms systematically.

We selected Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa for several reasons. First, all three were, and continue to be, critical media ecologies across the continent and within their respective regions. Second, Kenya and Nigeria were part of the negotiations and witnessed the Arusha Accords. They were engaged diplomatically with Rwanda for several years in the run-up to the genocide. Finally, South Africa was chosen since, during the genocide, it was preparing to usher in the first democratic elections and thus had its attention diverted.

In terms of chronology, we focus on the period of intense violence, April 6 through May 9, because these moments of extreme uncertainty often capture an extraordinary level of media spotlight, which is coupled with a struggle of narrative construction as fields try to "routinize the unexpected" (Tuchman, 1973) and make sense of the deluge of information. It is these narratives, formed in these early days of chaos, that tend to stick out in later discussions of atrocities, as shown by both Gruley and Duvall (2012) and Mamdani (2007, 2010) in their work on how narratives about the atrocity in Darfur became sedimented in media, political, and advocacy fields. Thus, this period allows us to think through which narratives eventually became dominant.

For the news articles, we modified a coding mechanism used in previous work on how journalism fields framed the violence in Darfur (Savelsberg & Nyseth Nzitatira, 2015; Wahutu, 2018b; Zacher, Nyseth Nzitatira, & Savelsberg, 2014). To cultivate a manageable scope, we focused on acts of killing and other general physical harm. However, future scholars could have additional insights into genocide portrayal in the media by analyzing other genocidal acts, like gender-based violence or property crimes. We disaggregate news articles by bylines, recognizing that just because a story appears in an African news organization, it should not be assumed to represent an "African perspective" (Wahutu, 2018c). This approach informs our analysis while allowing us to differentiate between African and non-African journalists.

Wahutu (2024) has shown that within the journalism fields we analyze, there exist two subfields. One, the "national subfield," is often composed of African journalists employed by the news organizations we analyze. These journalists often have to interact with the state and are affected by the state's relationship with the journalism field. Additionally, their audience is typically localized. The "cosmopolitan subfield" is typically made up of journalists working for agencies and primarily expatriates. Thus, they are not under state pressure in the same way as their African colleagues. Both subfields' stories are published in African newspapers, which becomes a site of discursive narrative struggles about how phenomena unfolding in African countries are covered by other African countries.

We originally planned to use this exact coding mechanism for the 21 radio broadcasts. However, standardized use of the coding mechanism across cases proved too simplistic in classifying coded language and inconsistent characterizations of violence. Echoing Alozie (2010), we coded the broadcasts deductively and thus read the transcripts several times, taking notes on recurring themes and organizing them according to whether they aligned with our already present code sheet. The multitudinal purposes of RTLM broadcasts resulted in contradictory or false reporting and veiled language. The genocide was often addressed euphemistically, with "work" at roadblocks replacing open discussion of the killing, or "Inkotanyi" referring to Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) combatants or Tutsi civilians in different contexts. As such, distinguishing

between frames of civil war (between two armed groups) and ethnic conflict (where violence is ethnically motivated) becomes almost impossible.

To account for this hurdle, we relied primarily on how journalists used these frames as a guide. This means we are solely focused on manifest frames, the first level where influence is first exerted (Benson, 2013). This is also premised on the understanding that the process of communication “relies on the fact that [people] share meaning socially” (Nothias, 2020, p. 2). Thus, it is social conventions that often fix meaning rather than individuals. Accordingly, “we spend a year in the war, fighting against the Inkotanyi” (Habimana, 1994b, para. 63) was coded as a civil war between two groups. At the same time, “we exterminate Inkotanyi to make them understand forever” (Habimana, 1994b, para. 63) was coded as genocidal intent. Nonetheless, we agree with Alozie’s (2010) assertion that our interpretation of the transcripts is one probable understanding of them and is likely to be influenced by our prior understandings of the context within which they were broadcast.

Our analysis of frames is anchored on Shulman and Sweitzer’s (2018) discussion of frames and framing. Journalists construct narratives with situational framing in mind, attempting to direct audiences to a set of conclusions. They do this by creating content that draws on an environment with which the audience is already familiar. This dependency ensures that the frames tap into the audiences’ abilities to quickly access content and experiences (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, p. 209). As such, frames ensure that the information presented can be fluently processed by consumers (Shulman & Sweitzer, 2018, 160). This fluency allows frames to help the audience feel familiar with the information retrieved from existing knowledge repertoires (Schwarz, 2011; Shulman & Sweitzer, 2018). Thus, analyzing frames within their given context is essential, rather than transposing exogenous understandings of frames (Wahutu, 2024). We are not claiming that frames always express the explicit intentionality of the communicator. Instead, we seek to elaborate on the implications of understanding the specificity of constructed pathways.

We are conscious that we focus on Anglophone Africa, even though, during the genocide, Rwanda was a Francophone country. The reason for this is twofold. First, Anglophone countries have historically had relatively more mature journalism fields than their Francophone and Lusophone counterparts (Bourgault, 1995; Nyamnjoh, 2005). Second, perhaps more importantly, we faced the twin issues of language limitations and minimal understanding of media cultures in Francophone and Lusophone countries. As a result, the results can be read either more broadly as representing how the three major media markets covered the genocide or narrowly as how three Anglophone countries covered the genocide. Although both readings would be correct, the fact that these three countries were significant media markets takes precedence over their “Anglophone-ness.”

Reporting On Rwanda

The coverage of the first month of the genocide was dominated by the Kenyan journalism field, which accounted for 77% of our data set content. Nigeria followed this at 16.67% and South Africa at 6.25%. Table 1 points to a bifurcation of the fields, with the “cosmopolitan subfield” accounting for 54.16% of the coverage and the “national subfield” for 45.83%. Although 16.67% of the articles had no byline attribution, we assume that in-house journalists filed these nonattributed articles.

Table 1. Frequency of Articles Disaggregated Using Byline Attribution.

| National Subfields | | Cosmopolitan Subfields | | | Named Western Journalists | Total |
|---------------------|---------|------------------------|--------|----------|---------------------------|---------|
| African Journalists | Reuters | AFP | AP | Agencies | | |
| 44 | 15 | 6 | 7 | 22 | 2 | 96 |
| (45.83) | (15.62) | (6.25) | (7.29) | (22.92) | (2.08) | (99.99) |

In the period we are interested in, African journalists accounted for 45.83% of the coverage, and Reuters accounted for 15.92%. This increased to 21% throughout the genocide, while decreasing to 40% for African journalists. Table 1 captures that one of two of the continent's most visible atrocities was understood through the lens of a small contingent of organizations from the global North. African journalists were not "dominants"/"incumbents" in journalism fields in their countries but were more "challengers"/"pretenders" to the cosmopolitan subfields (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 206; Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, p. 6).

Framing the Genocide

In this section, we focus on three frames from the coding instrument. First, the civil war frame depicts the violence as a war between two organized groups within a country, with one group seeking to overthrow the government or secede. This frame prioritizes control over the state and its mechanisms. Second, the ethnic conflict frame specifically refers to violence as ethnic or tribal in nature. Third, the genocide frame describes actions as genocidal or having genocidal intent. This frame is distinguished from the ethnic conflict frame through a specific reference to the term genocide. Though not an exhaustive list of frames employed, these particular frames are central to understanding how African countries frame an instance of massive human rights violations. Our focus captures both the frame many have critiqued as insufficient (civil war) and the frame many have argued should have been employed in the coverage (genocide). Table 2 alerts us to two issues. First, three of the larger media fields on the continent primarily framed Rwanda as a civil war, like western journalism fields. The second is that the genocide frame came a distant third to the ethnic conflict frame, the second most used frame in this period.

Table 2. Frequency of Frames Used by Subfields.

| | National Subfields | Cosmopolitan Subfields | Journalism Field |
|------------|--------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| Genocide | 1 | 3.1 | 4.17 |
| Civil war | 26 | 34.4 | 60.42 |
| Ethnic war | 23 | 25 | 47.92 |

Table 2 highlights that 60% of the stories published in this period relied on the civil war frame to narrate the genocide at the field level. Forty-eight percentage of stories framed the violence as primarily ethnic. In comparison, only 4% of the accounts referred to the violence as genocidal. The paucity in the use of the genocide frame highlights that, while journalism fields from the global North have often been critiqued for being too slow to recognize the genocide, media fields in these three countries also seemed hesitant to

use this frame during the first month of violence. Moreover, as shown in Table 2, we find the counterintuitive result that when the genocide frame was employed, the cosmopolitan media subfield used this frame with more frequency.

Furthermore, we find an overlap between RTLM broadcasts and the newspapers, pointing to the limiting nature of media narratives and how they constrict journalists' framing choices. As actors within a media field, we surmise that their level of agency vis-à-vis frame selection was constrained just as much as it was for colleagues in Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria. That being said, as much as the "rules of the game" and news production constrain, they also allow for innovation in source selection and how to insert subjectivity. Thus, it would be imprudent not to acknowledge that RTLM presenters had some agency in their choice of frames and which guests they brought into the newsroom, many of whom were extremists. Kothari (2010) and Wahl-Jorgensen (2013) alert us to the use of sources by journalists to insert subjectivity in coverage while still posturing as objective in coverage. Below, we present a fuller analysis of how and why these frames were employed as they were.

Civil War in Rwanda

RTLM broadcasts often ended with the exhortation, "Long live Rwandans." This sense of who was "Rwandan" was exclusionary—it sought to exclude non-Hutu populations from the national identity. This narrative framed Hutu as rightful citizens, whereas Tutsi were framed as interloping agitators. Framing in this category often prioritizes control of the nation-state and its institutions rather than explicit discussion of ethnic division. The result of this was broadcasts communicating actions by Hutu as necessary in stemming the possibility of all-out violence:

Give information to the soldiers, and all those who are in charge of security, continue to conduct night patrols, but only those authorized, calm each other, collaborate on protesting against the looters from wherever they should come [. . .] And then, everybody would be happy for having participated in rebuilding their country, and God will help us with that. Go on fighting for peace and have a long life. (Sindikubwabo, 1994, para. 39)

Moreover, it portrayed being "Rwandan" as being marked by the will to protect the state from RPF troops: "Now, this campaign is going on, and we hope that the Rwandan population has understood that they must make common cause with their Army, that they must avoid any kind of divisions, interethnic or interregional hatred, etc." (Kambanda, 1994, para. 30).

The above framing marks Tutsi's killing as part of protecting the state from interlopers seeking to threaten peace. This particular frame was also employed by both subfields (Table 2). Early examples (April 8th) include *The Guardian's* (1994a) "violence [erupting] among the military and civilian populace in the Rwandan capital, Kigali" (p. 1), and *The Daily Nation's* "Rwanda's President Juvenal Habyarimana was struggling to stop power from slipping from his hands as his country slid back toward civil war and famine" (Reuters, 1994, p. 8). Under this frame, Rwanda was experiencing a civil war that stemmed from disputes between the Hutu-dominated government and the Tutsi's rebelling forces. In Rwanda, this frame acted as a mechanism to stoke fear, as the notion of protecting the state built mimetic bridges to prior incursions by

the RPF. In other countries, this frame worked to discuss the protagonists in the conflict and provide the audience with a contextual bridge to other civil wars on the continent.

Violence in Rwanda as an Ethnic Conflict

The second most commonly used frame was that of ethnic conflict. Scholarship has often decried the use of this by Western journalists as working to depoliticize conflicts in Africa and relying on colonial tropes (see Ebo, 1992; Gruley & Duvall, 2012; Myers et al. 1996). Nonetheless, as shown in Table 2, 48% of the articles on Rwanda used ethnicity as an explanatory frame. The cosmopolitan subfield used it in only 2% more articles than the national media subfield.

In Rwanda, the discourse on ethnic differences was often contradictory. A week after the crashing of the plane carrying President Habyarimana, RTLM broadcasted the following message:

Since the tragic death of the president of the Republic who perished in the aircraft shot down while carrying back the Rwandan and Burundian presidents from a summit of the Chiefs of State of the region called by the Tanzanian president, ethnic divisions caused many victims. (Bicamumpaka, 1994, para.17)

However, in May, the discussion of ethnicity shifted to a call for ethnic tolerance:

Let us live in peace [. . .] All of us [*inaudible*], Hutus, and Tutsis alike to live in harmony; we are united . . . Even if the person is Tutsi, Kantano, so long as you are together, manning the same roadblock, fighting the enemy together, why attack him? Why call him an . . . Inyenzi? Such things are not acceptable. (Mukingo, 1994, paras. 33–34)

The contradictions abound—this same broadcast also framed Tutsi as perpetrators, saying, “No part of the country has ever belonged exclusively to the Tutsi who possibly may have attacked the Hutu country” (Habimana, 1994a, para. 48). This framing paved the way for discourse that advocated violence against Tutsi to ensure Hutu safety:

We could have put Tutsis back to their place equaling their number, and they would never think again about invading us [. . .] Had we started earlier, we could have defeated *Inkotanyi* and brought them to Kigali, crawling, or hands up. (Gahigi, 1994, para. 5)

This frame took a much more introspective path in Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria. Even as *The Daily Nation* employed the civil war frame, they simultaneously used ethnicity as an explanatory frame. On April 8, four articles in *The Daily Nation* framed Rwanda as a civil war, and three others framed the violence as an ethnic conflict. John Gachie (1994), the then foreign editor, wrote, “[t]he downing of the plane carrying Rwandese and Burundian Presidents near Kigali Airport on Wednesday by as yet unidentified attackers raises the specter of fresh ethnic violence in both countries” (p. 9). In a story appearing in *The Guardian* on April 10, the author writes, “[t]he killing of the presidents threatens to unleash a new tide of tribal slaughter in the two tiny neighbors, bedeviled for decades by ethnic savagery” (Malongo, 1994, p. A19). This sense of

anarchy was also present in South Africa, where *The Sowetan* framed the violence as an “orgy of tribal slaughter in which tens of thousands of people were killed” (SAPA-AP, 1994, p. 10).

In Kenya and Nigeria, this frame often emphasized the colonial, political, and economic elements of ethnic divisions. In Nigeria, *The Guardian* (1994c) contextualized the violence as follows:

The story follows the same refrain. Ethnic nationalities lumped together to join hands to win political independence from colonial masters, so they can handle their own affairs and hold their destinies in their hands. As it has been shown in different parts of the world [. . .], as soon as colonialists depart, the union welded together, usually by force, begins groaning over the strains of diversity. (p. 17)

Additionally, *The Daily Nation* (1994) showcased this approach to the ethnic conflict frame:

It goes without saying that to judge all of Africa by such carnage as we have seen in Rwanda and Burundi, Zaire, Mozambique, Angola, and elsewhere would be as unfair as to suggest that Europe should be permanently condemned for its centuries of sporadic slaughter, climaxing with the Holocaust and continuing to this day in former Yugoslavia. (p. 7)

We attribute this to the homology of production and consumption spaces that play out in different national contexts. Indeed, Nyamnjoh (2005) and Wasserman and Maweu (2014) emphasize that the analysis of journalism fields in Africa must take the role of ethnicity and the politics of identity seriously. As Albaugh (2016) has shown, in many African countries, ethnic belonging is often much more present than civic citizenship. Moreover, if frames rely on already-present knowledge, the presence of this frame in Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria should be understood within its context. It was used to *domesticate* events happening on the continent.

An Unfolding Genocide

Table 2 captures the limited use of the genocide frame by three significant African media markets. This frame appears in only 4.7% of the articles we analyzed.² In Rwanda, genocidal intent was reinforced through broadcasts reminding listeners that “[w]e could have put Tutsi back to their place equaling their number, and they would never think again about invading us” (Gahigi, 1994, para. 5). The rhetoric of “work” appears continually in the RTLM broadcasts—it has been noted by several scholars that “work” was often a euphemism for killing Tutsi and moderate Hutu: “A quite special hello also to all our soldiers, to all the security agents, to all the youths of the parties, and all the volunteers who are at roadblocks and who are working” (Kantano, 1994, para. 69).

² It only shows up in 14% of articles over the 100 days of violence.

Outside Rwanda, the first articles that explicitly refer to the violence as genocidal appear almost two weeks after the violence began. The first reference to Rwanda as a genocide occurred in *The Daily Nation* on April 25, where a story from the cosmopolitan subfield referred to the violence as follows:

Burundi, still reeling from the massacres of tens of thousands of people last year after the assassination of its first Hutu President, had until now avoided the genocide that engulfed Rwanda after both countries' Presidents died in a mysterious April 6th plane crash. (Agencies, 1994, p. 8)

Two days later, *The Guardian* (1994b) Nigeria quoted the secretary-general of the RPF as calling the violence a genocide: "Today, everybody is talking of a ceasefire. The question of genocide has been relegated to a secondary issue," complained RPF Secretary-General, Theogene Rudasingwa, on Monday in northern Tanzania, where weekend peace talks failed to get off the ground" (para. 16).

The Sowetan was the last to pick up on this frame. This frame made an appearance on July 1. An editor in South Africa later explained this delay as a driving motivation for their focus on Darfur and the use of the genocide frame in 2012.

Interestingly, this frame, seen as necessary by many, finds minimal use across our sample. The frame appears in a mere 4.7% of the coverage throughout "high genocide," suggesting that the failure to use this frame may have been widespread rather than a sole failing of Western media and institutions. As shown in Table 2, the scarcity of this frame in our sample cannot be argued to result from an overreliance on the cosmopolitan subfield. However, the hesitance in framing Rwanda as genocide is not surprising considering the work by Wahutu (2018b, 2024) on the framing of Darfur on the continent. Journalists point out the difficulty in framing atrocities as genocide in light of the legal requirements and definition of genocide. The uncertainty over the legal requirements for its use and the correlated political pressures disincentivize the widespread use of the genocide label.

Importantly, policy actors behind the scenes did not always share this hesitancy. For example, General Roméo Dallaire provided his United Nations superiors with evidence of impending genocide. Still, the United Nations and other actors from the global North chose to reject this evidence in favor of inaction. Despite this information, they outwardly rejected the genocide label, a decision that many scholars tie to a lack of political will to intervene or provide humanitarian support (Barnett, 2012; Power, 2001).

Discussion

Speaking at the inaugural Congress of Sociologists meeting in Frankfurt in 1910, Weber reminded his audience of the importance of taking the press' social context into account when analyzing the reporting of events (Weber, 1976). By staying true to Weber's (1976) call for a sociology of the press and turning that focus to media fields in African countries, we can explain the seeming convergence in frames used by Rwanda, Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria. We have shown how different countries used similar frames for different ends. Moreover, by moving from the field to the subfield level, we can point to congruency in how African and non-African journalists discussed Rwanda. Within the cosmopolitan subfields, we find that unlike Darfur's coverage

a decade later in Wahutu (2018a, 2018c), journalism fields on the continent preferred to publish stories credited to multiple agencies at once (labeled “agencies”) rather than rely primarily on Reuters (Table 2).

We show the importance of considering nation-specific traits when analyzing journalism fields on the continent. Taking the homology of production and consumption spaces seriously, we anchor our discussion in arguments that valence frames are central in allowing the audience to “endorse the position advocated in the frame” (Shulman & Sweitzer, 2018, p. 157). This unfolded in using words that presented the killings as akin to farming or protecting the nation—the latter framing violence as a war for the country’s soul connected the violence to earlier conflicts between the state and RPF. The civil war frame tapped into the feelings of insecurity and fear of many Hutu. As RTLM augmented information from other virulent organizations, perpetrators would have felt “more confident, relying on this information when forming judgments” (Shulman & Sweitzer, 2018, p. 160) over whether or when to engage in violence.

The convergence toward the civil war frame within and outside Rwanda epitomizes the overarching sentiment that the violence was between two belligerent forces trying to gain control of the country. Straus (2007) finds that early in the genocide, RTLM speakers often urged listeners not to attack civilians but instead push for negotiations with the rebels. However, with the broadcasters’ propensity to engage in doublespeak, it is difficult to ascertain how listeners decoded these messages. Additionally, despite our reticence over causality arguments, it would not be a misnomer to suggest that these “mild” broadcasts may have been interpreted as anything other than a call to arms. Using simplistic language, such as the referral to killing as “work,” provided a mechanism for the audience to process the messages fluently.

The use of the civil war frame reflected global legal standards. In terms of evidence, civil war has the lowest caliber of proof. Terms like genocide have a dynamic of identity-based intentionality, which is challenging to identify in real-time. The civil war frame does not have these caveats, with a conflict between opposing groups being the standard for occurrence. Beyond this, the Rwandan government was incentivized to define the conflict as a civil war, since such a classification limited the involvement of international actors in internal matters. Wurie Khan (1998) has shown that parties engaged in conflict tend to work alongside media organizations to perpetuate politically or legally beneficial narratives in their campaign to sway international actors. There is no reason to assume that the same was not true in Rwanda (see Bond, 2019).

Conclusion

A comparative approach forces us to reckon with the assumptions scholars tend to bring to journalism in Africa. A prevailing hypothesis is that African journalism fields cannot cover events across the continent. Nevertheless, as we show here, national subfields played a more significant role in constructing Rwanda’s narrative than they would a decade later in Darfur (see Wahutu, 2024). This finding generates new conundrums. Why would African fields rely even more on the cosmopolitan subfield as they mature over the decade? How did Francophone and Lusophone Africa cover the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi? Though not a focus of this study, these questions open new avenues for future research. In the same vein, the results in this study may look different if the analysis went beyond our time frame. Mcdoom (2021) and Straus (2007) find that RTLM rhetoric grew more virulent over time, even as Rwanda moved into what Straus (2007) calls a “low genocide period” (p. 621). We suspect that the frames used by RTLM and the

other three journalism fields would have diverged to mimic political and diplomatic narratives in much the same way they converged based on diplomatic narratives.

The comparison between RTLM and regional organizations shows what may be lost by examining RTLM solely as “hate radio.” The functionality of media messaging lies in frames that are familiar within a nation or region. Although the civil war in Rwanda evoked memories of 1952 and 1990, it also invoked a sense of retrospection in other countries (Alozie, 2010). This suggests that lingual choices can normalize hateful rhetoric in familiar frames. Thus, propagandistic messaging must be presented within a contextualized media ecology to be effective. A comparative analysis can help us better understand such content’s reach and capacity, especially when multiple fields rely on similar language with vastly different effects. We have shown the generative potential of engaging with propagandistic media within the broader ecology of narrative production. Doing so can provide valuable lessons about how violence and conflict are understood and portrayed in real time.

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