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RECONSTRUCTING RWANDA

How Rwandan reporters use constructive journalism to promote peace

Karen McIntyre and Meghan Sobel

In 1994 Rwanda, some journalists used their power for evil when government-run media houses perpetrated genocide through what scholars termed "hate media." Since then, however, Rwanda's media landscape has changed dramatically and the country has seen tremendous social and economic progress. Building on the tenets of social responsibility and framing theories and on literature regarding journalistic role functions, this study utilized qualitative interviews with Rwandan journalists to discover how they view their roles today and whether they have contributed to the reconstruction and recovery of the country by practicing constructive journalism. In keeping with the social responsibility theory of the press, constructive journalism calls for the news media to be an active participant in enhancing societal well-being. Results revealed that while journalists in Rwanda aim to fulfill traditional roles like informing and educating the public, they value a unique role to promote unity and reconciliation. They carry out this role by regularly practicing constructive journalism techniques, such as solutions journalism and restorative narrative, which involve reporting on stories that foster hope, healing, and resilience, and they strongly believe that this style of reporting has contributed to the country's post-genocide reconstruction.

KEYWORDS constructive journalism; interviews; journalistic roles; restorative narrative; Rwanda; solutions journalism

Introduction

The Hutchins Commission declared 70 years ago that the news media have a responsibility to consider society's best interest when making journalistic decisions (Hutchins Commission 1947). Over the decades, journalists have considered this responsibility to varying degrees, with neutral, detached journalists unconcerned about the effects of their stories on one end of the spectrum and more active, participatory reporters who aim to improve society through their work on the other end (Bro 2008; Cohen 1963; Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman 1972). In recent years, several forms of news reporting have emerged under the umbrella of "constructive journalism," which, in keeping with the social responsibility theory of the press, calls for the news media to be an active participant in enhancing societal well-being (Gyldensted 2015).

Perhaps nowhere in the world has societal well-being increased as dramatically as it has in Rwanda the past two decades, since the sub-Saharan African country lost up to 70 percent of its Tutsi population to genocide (Taylor 1999).

In roughly 100 days, from April through July 1994, Hutu residents raped and slaughtered their Tutsi neighbors with machetes and anything else that could be used as a weapon (Taylor 1999). Women and children were not spared. The killing was senseless

and irrational. The genocide ended when the Rwandan Patriotic Front, led by Rwanda's current president, Paul Kagame, defeated the government-backed militias that spearheaded the killings. In the end, between 500,000 and one million individuals were murdered. In addition, two million fled and lived as refugees in neighboring countries (Taylor 1999).

Rwanda had been engaged in a civil war since 1990. The society was not stable, but instability turned into mass murder when then-President Juvenal Habyarimana's plane was mysteriously shot down (Taylor 1999). That incident sparked the killings, but many blame the media for fully perpetrating the genocide (Bromley 2011; Kayumba and Kimonyo 2006; Kellow and Steeves 1998).

Government-run media houses exacerbated the genocide through what scholars have called "hate media" (Kellow and Steeves 1998). The most infamous instigator was the government-controlled Radio-Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), whose reporters used cultural and religious symbols to effectively spread messages of hate (Kellow and Steeves 1998). Journalists explicitly called for the Tutsis to be killed, and they aided the hunt by exposing their hiding places (Kellow and Steeves 1998). At the time, the literacy rate in Rwanda was below 50 percent (Central Intelligence Agency 2017) and trust in the media was high—so high that some individuals viewed the voice over the airwaves as a message from God (Journalist 16, interview, May 21, 2016). The journalists, who were not formally trained, inspired average citizens to savagely kill the friends and neighbors they previously lived with in peace (Kellow and Steeves 1998). Some journalists themselves took part in the killing. The media campaign was so influential that some believe the genocide would not have occurred without it (Kellow and Steeves 1998).

Since the genocide, however, Rwanda has seen tremendous social and economic growth, and its media landscape has changed dramatically (Kayumba and Kimonyo 2006). Rwanda has the highest primary school enrollment rates in Africa (UNICEF 2015), a higher percentage of women in parliament (64 percent) than any country in the world (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2017), and a soaring Gross Domestic Product rate (African Development Bank Group 2016). Additionally, literacy has increased by more than 20 percentage points since the genocide, to 70.5 percent (Central Intelligence Agency 2017).

The media landscape has also developed. The number of media houses skyrocketed after the genocide, thanks to help from international donors, and many local journalists now receive formal training at the National University of Rwanda's School of Journalism and Communication, which launched in 1995 with support from UNESCO (Kayumba and Kimonyo 2006). However, given its quick evolution, the media environment in Rwanda remains complex. In sum, the role of a journalist in present-day Rwanda is very different than it was 22 years ago. Therefore, the purpose of this study—in-depth interviews with Rwandan journalists—was to determine whether the media played a role in the country's recovery and redevelopment since the genocide. Specifically, we asked how journalists in Rwanda viewed their roles in 2016 and if they used constructive journalism techniques in an ongoing effort to seek peace in a country where the media once promoted war.

Building on the tenets of social responsibility and framing theory and on literature regarding journalistic role functions, the following research questions are posed to understand more fully how journalists in Rwanda view their roles in 2016—22 years after journalists in the country helped perpetrate genocide.

RQ1: Which professional roles do Rwandan journalists value in 2016?

RQ2: Do Rwandan journalists in 2016 tend to embrace a more active or passive journalistic role function?

RQ3: Do Rwandan journalists in 2016 use constructive journalism techniques, such as peace journalism, solutions journalism, and restorative narrative techniques, to contribute to the country's post-genocide development?

Literature Review

In order to understand the ways in which Rwandan journalists view their role in the post-genocide reconstruction of the country, this paper first considers previous research on journalists' roles, followed by a discussion of the growing practice of constructive journalism. Within the context of constructive journalism, three forms of news framing—peace journalism, solutions journalism, and restorative narrative—are discussed. These three types of framing, which fall under the umbrella of constructive journalism, emphasize a journalist's dedication to the public good. Finally, an overview of the complex media landscape in Rwanda, including its political and economic influences, is explained.

Journalists' Roles

A half century ago, Cohen (1963) identified a dichotomous classification of journalists—neutrals and participants. One decade later, Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman (1972) conducted the first of the "American Journalist" surveys, where he sought to determine what journalists thought were the most important aspects of their jobs. Again, they identified the two ideological types, or functions: "Neutrals" preferred detachment and objectivity, while "Participants" favored involvement and advocacy.

Another way to think of "Neutral" journalists is as passive, whereas "Participant" journalists are more active. Peter Bro (2008) suggested the passive journalist is concerned with disseminating stories regardless of their effects and thus is concerned with what information preceded the news report. Contrarily, the active journalist serves more fully as a participant in interpreting the story and thus is concerned about the effect of the news or what happens after the report. Bro (2008) argues that there is a desire for more active journalism, where reporters try to help community members act upon problems rather than simply learn about them.

Of course, journalistic role conceptions are more nuanced than the simple passive-active dichotomy. In the past few decades, many studies have identified more specific roles and looked at how journalists in various countries perceive those roles. Weaver et al. (2007) suggest that American journalists, for example, identify with the roles of adversary, disseminator, interpreter, and populist mobilizer. At the time of the current study, it appeared no academic articles had been published examining the roles of journalists in modern-day Rwanda. However, studies that examined the roles of journalists in other countries indicated that reporters seem to prioritize some of the same functions. Specifically, journalists around the world seemed to be committed to providing the public with factual, impartial information and investigating government misdeeds (Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Herscovitz 2004; Ramaprasad 2001; Weaver et al. 2007). Recently, McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour (2016) identified a new role among American journalists—the Contextualist, a socially responsible journalist who aims to go beyond the basic facts by

providing context and considering society's well-being during the newsmaking process. This type of journalist would fall into the more active, participatory role classification.

Interestingly, research has shown that journalists in non-Western countries, including some nations in Africa, valued more active, interventionist roles than their Western counterparts (Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Ramaprasad 2001). Hanitzsch et al. (2011, 280) defined interventionism as "the active support of particular values, positions, groups and social change." They concluded:

A tendency towards interventionism can be found among journalists from developing societies and transitional democracies. It comes as no surprise that journalists are most willing to promote social change in contexts where such transformation rapidly occurs—or where it seems needed. (Hanitzsch et al. 2011, 281)

Given the rapid social and economic change that has occurred in Rwanda in the past 22 years, it would be reasonable to believe journalists there might lean toward an interventionist role.

That said, it is important to note that journalistic roles are not mutually exclusive. Weaver et al. (2007) said a majority of journalists identify with more than one role function. Ward (2009, 299) found that most journalists see themselves as a "combination of informer, interpreter, and advocate," and even the most activist reporters usually embrace the traditional value of factual accuracy.

Constructive Journalism

An active, participatory, interventionist style of news reporting, where journalists feel an obligation to improve society, is not a new idea. Lasswell, in 1927, suggested that instead of mobilizing individuals' anger or conflict, communication techniques (in this context, propaganda) could be used to mobilize peace efforts:

Let us, therefore, reason together ... and find the good, and when we have found it, let us find out how to make up the public mind to accept it. Inform, cajole, bamboozle and seduce in the name of the public good. (Lasswell 1927, 5)

Twenty years later, the Hutchins Commission (1947) declared that journalists have a responsibility to consider society's best interest when making journalistic decisions. Shortly afterward, Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956, 77) formally acknowledged the social responsibility theory of the press, which asserted that publishers operate their media "with some concern for the public good."

In the 1990s, after witnessing the ubiquity of negative and conflict-driven news, newscaster Martyn Lewis publicly argued for more news that promoted the public good:

What I am arguing is this: that when we come to decide the editorial priorities for each day's news we should be more prepared than we have been in the past to weigh the positive stories—not artificially created, but as they naturally occur in the news agenda, on the same set of journalistic scales on which we weigh the negative stories. (Lewis and Rowe 1994, 34)

The style of journalism Lewis called for has since been practiced in several forms in the industry, but under many different terms, a few of which are discussed below. A cohesive body of academic research surrounding these styles of reporting is lacking (McIntyre

2015; McIntyre and Gyldensted, [forthcoming](#)). Until more research is published that conceptualizes and links the various forms of socially responsible journalism, one might consider framing, which refers to the way journalists craft a message so that a certain meaning is highlighted, as a relevant theoretical explanation (Entman 1993).

To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described. (Entman 1993, 52, emphasis in original)

After diving deeper into literature on constructive journalism, this paper briefly discusses three forms of news framing—peace journalism, solutions journalism, and restorative narrative—that emphasize a journalist’s dedication to the public good. These news forms can be considered under the umbrella term, constructive journalism.

Constructive journalism was born in an effort to combat growing audience disengagement by reporting a more balanced mix of stories. Haagerup (2014) argued that the news media’s negativity bias disengages viewers and threatens democracy, and reporting in a more constructive, meaningful way brings back audiences. The concept has been defined and introduced to the academic literature as an emerging form of journalism that involves applying positive psychology and other behavioral science techniques to news processes and production in an effort to create more productive and engaging stories, while remaining committed to journalism’s core functions (Gyldensted 2015; McIntyre 2015; McIntyre and Gyldensted, [forthcoming](#)). Gyldensted (2015, 42) described constructive journalism as a more comprehensive form of journalism that accurately portrays the world by covering not only stories about conflict and destruction, but stories about collaboration and progress as well. Although it has roots in older, similar movements such as civic journalism, constructive journalism is distinct in its approach (McIntyre and Gyldensted, [forthcoming](#)). It is also important to note that constructive journalism should not be confused with positive news. The latter involves “fluff,” or feel-good stories that are cute and entertaining but lack widespread social significance, whereas the former involves “rigorous, compelling reporting that empowers audiences to respond constructively, presenting a fuller picture of truth while upholding journalism’s core functions and ethics,” as described on the Constructive Journalism Project website on November 1, 2016.

This style of news has been gaining momentum in the industry throughout the world, including various nations in Africa. It has been recently covered in popular media and trade journals such as *The Guardian*, *Huffington Post*, and *Columbia Journalism Review* (Dagan Wood 2016; Gyldensted 2014; Hollis 2015); and in some form, constructive journalism is being practiced on every continent (Gyldensted 2015). In South Africa, constructive journalism leader Cathrine Gyldensted conducted trainings for journalists employed by publications owned by the large media company Times Media Group (Pilane 2014). In addition to being practiced by journalists *in* Africa, constructive journalism has been practiced in Western nations *about* Africa. For example, Swedish National Television has been constructively covering Africa since its head of foreign news learned from a survey that Swedish residents held views of Africa that were 30–40 years outdated. The more constructive coverage is intended to inform viewers of the progress many African nations have made in terms of democratic elections and living conditions (Gyldensted 2015). Other, more specific, forms of journalism share an overarching goal of contributing to society’s

well-being and therefore fit under the umbrella of constructive journalism (McIntyre and Gyldensted, [forthcoming](#)). Three such branches are discussed below—peace journalism, solutions journalism, and restorative narrative. It is important to note that the following genres are not mutually exclusive and certainly overlap in their overarching goals. Because constructive journalism is a concept new to scholarly literature, more work needs to be done to precisely define and measure the concept and distinguish it from similar forms of journalism.

Similarly to how the media have historically contributed to violent conflict, the media have, in many instances, contributed to peaceful resolutions to conflict (Bratić 2008). So-called peace journalism occurs “when editors and reporters make choices—about what to report, and how to report it—that create opportunities for society at large to consider and to value non-violent responses to conflict” (Lynch and McGoldrick 2005, 5).

Peace journalism. Peace journalism has primarily been studied in the context of national or international conflict and has been regarded as an opposite of war journalism (Galtung 2002). Although some scholars have criticized peace journalism for its non-specific application, among other things (Hanitzsch 2007; Lynch 2007), efforts to conceptualize the practice have been on the rise (Bratić 2008; Nohrstedt and Ottosen 2015). Bratić (2008) provided the example of Studio Ijambo (Kirundi for “Wise Words”)—a media organization in Burundi that produced programs intended to promote peace after the Rwandan genocide and that has since served as a peace journalism model for other conflicts throughout the continent. Several other examples of peace journalism stories can be found in Lynch’s (2002) “Reporting the World” report. Peace journalism is considered a form of constructive journalism in that it uses peace-focused framing of news stories with the intention of encouraging resolutions to wars and similar large-scale conflicts, but it is distinct in that it focuses on national and international conflict whereas other types of constructive stories may encompass many other topics.

Solutions journalism. Solutions journalism, another form of constructive news, can sometimes overlap with peace journalism but is more specifically defined as “rigorous reporting about how people are responding to problems” (Solutions Journalism Network 2015). These stories report conflicts or other problems, but they focus their framing on possible responses to such social problems in an attempt to “engage readers, offer a blueprint for change, and alter the tone of public discourse” (Thier 2016, 330). Solutions-based reporting is not new (Benesch 1998), but it has blossomed in popularity since the 2013 launch of the Solutions Journalism Network, an independent, nonprofit US-based organization that promotes the practice worldwide. Examples of solutions-based stories can be found in the Solutions Journalism Network’s Story Tracker database which includes 1872 news stories that showcase solutions-based reporting involving 103 countries, including several countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Like peace journalism, solutions journalism is considered a form of constructive journalism due to its solution-based framing of newsworthy events, but this genre can apply to a wide scope of social problems ranging from local to international.

Restorative narrative. Restorative narrative is a final form of constructive news relevant to the current study. Dahmen (2016, 94) said this style of news reporting “intends to cover the story beyond the immediacy of the breaking news and in doing so, to help

individuals and communities move forward in the wake of large-impact events." Images & Voices of Hope (ivoh), a non-profit media group that aims to "strengthen the media's role as an agent of world benefit," further defines the practice as a form of journalism that involves stories of "recovery, restoration and resilience in the aftermath, or midst of, difficult times" (Tenore 2016). Restorative narrative proponents lament that traditional news stories are often "confined" to the facts of a tragedy and should be broadened to include stories of recovery and resilience (Tenore 2016). This sentiment is a byproduct of the complaint that journalists tend to "parachute in" and cover a tragedy before quickly moving on to another story. For one example of a restorative narrative news story, see the *Washington Post's* "A Survivor's Life," which documents one survivor's recovery months after she was shot in the 2015 mass shooting in Roseburg, Oregon (Saslow 2015). The focus on themes such as restoration and resilience make restorative narrative a form of constructive journalism, yet it stands out as distinct given its focus of reporting specific tragedies, like natural disasters or mass shootings, long after they occur.

Given their emphases on national conflict, a search for solutions, and sustained coverage of the restoration process after a crisis, these forms of constructive journalism aptly apply to news coverage in post-genocide Rwanda.

Rwanda's Media Landscape

Journalists' role valuations and actual news coverage decisions are shaped by the political, educational, professional, and economic structures of the media system in which they operate. In Rwanda, these factors undoubtedly influence journalistic practices, and it is therefore important to have a basic understanding of the country's past and present news landscape.

Rwanda's leader, Paul Kagame, has been the president for 17 years and a political leader since the genocide. His government has an authoritarian reputation, and does not allow an outspoken opposition (Gettleman 2013; Reyntjens 2006). Before 2002, all media outlets were government owned (Bonde et al. 2015). In the past 15 years, however, the liberalization of the media has allowed for a more diverse landscape to emerge. As of 2015, there were 38 radio stations (9 of which were online only), 11 television stations (4 online only), 53 newspapers, and 23 news websites actively operating in Rwanda (Bonde et al. 2015). They are regulated by a public, semi-independent institution called the Media High Council (2017). Despite the relatively high number of newspapers, print news targets urban, elite readers, while most Rwandans get their media from radio and, increasingly, television (BBC 2015).

Although commercial news organizations are now permitted in Rwanda, the ownership structure of news outlets can be difficult to determine. In a survey of Rwandan journalists, more than one-third of respondents said that ownership of media is not transparent in the country (Bonde et al. 2015, Annex II, 24). Further, many media houses that are privately owned largely rely on government funding through advertising; and journalists claim that government entities buy advertisements from outlets that support the government through their news coverage and withhold advertising money from news organizations critical of the government (Bonde et al. 2015). This dilemma complicates the issue of press freedom.

Rwanda's constitution guarantees a free press (Rwanda 2003), however, several clauses allow for restrictions. For example, journalists cannot promote genocide ideology

or incite ethnic divisionism, which is broadly defined as “a crime committed by any oral or written expression or any act of division that could generate conflicts among the population or cause disputes” (Rwanda 2001, Article 3). This law—a product of the 1994 genocide—is widely applied and commonly used to restrict journalists (Bonde et al. 2015; Sobel and McIntyre 2017). Despite media reforms by the government in 2013, journalists fear punishment from authorities and therefore resort to self-censorship (Sobel and McIntyre 2017).

The Rwanda Media Commission, an independent regulatory body, was created in 2013 in part to protect journalists’ press freedom. Additionally, the Rwanda Media Commission is tasked with regulating the daily functioning of the media and conduct of journalists, including the promotion of professional and ethical practices (Bonde et al. 2015), which is a problem in Rwanda. Despite the creation of the journalism school at the National University of Rwanda, not all journalists receive formal training, and there exists a “low level of professionalism and skills/competencies” in the field (79).

Considering the complex and quickly evolving media landscape in Rwanda, this study aimed to achieve a deeper understanding of how journalists in Rwanda viewed their roles in 2016 and if they practiced constructive journalism techniques in an ongoing effort to uphold peace in their country.

Method

This study utilized interviews with current and former Rwandan journalists. In-depth interviews have been called “one of the most powerful methods” in qualitative research because they enable researchers to “step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves” (McCracken 1988, 9). Through interviews, journalists’ opinions can be examined as indicators of their professional values (Cassidy 2005; Willnat and Weaver 2014). Interviewees provided unique insights into the roles, opportunities, and challenges of working in the media industry during the post-genocide reconstruction of Rwanda. According to Besley and Roberts (2010, 70), “journalists represent excellent candidates for qualitative interview projects” because, due to their profession, they should be able to articulate their experiences clearly and effectively (Lindlof and Taylor 2002). For the purposes of this study, a journalist was defined as someone who earns the majority of his or her income by working for an established news organization, either in print, broadcast, or online. Bloggers who maintain a self-run blog but do not also publish stories in recognized newspapers were excluded.

To create the sampling frame for this study, at the outset, journalists were identified by conducting searches of Rwandan news outlets’ websites for journalist contact information. A later search of social media sites was used to contact additional reporters and editors. After initial journalists were contacted, a snowball sample was used—the initial journalists were asked to suggest other journalists who might be interested in participating (see Table 1 for list of journalists included in the sample).

Interviewing

Twenty-four in-depth interviews were conducted. All interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the interviewee, most of which were at coffee shops or the interviewee’s office. One interview was conducted over the phone and the remaining 23 interviews

TABLE 1

Job title, employer, and employer type of the interviewees

Participant	Job title	Employer	Employer type
Journalist 1	Former radio/TV presenter	Voice of Africa	Religious
Journalist 2	Editor	Radio/TV 10	Commercial
Journalist 3	Online news editor	<i>Izuba Rirashe</i>	Government-run
Journalist 4	Senior producer	Radio/TV 10	Commercial
Journalist 5	Former journalist	Withheld	Government-run
Journalist 6	Editor/reporter/presenter	Radio Isango Star	Commercial
Journalist 7	Reporter	Withheld	Commercial
Journalist 8	Reporter	<i>The New Times</i>	Government-run
Journalist 9	Editor	<i>Umusingi</i>	Commercial
Journalist 10	Cofounder	<i>Umuseke.rw</i>	Commercial
Journalist 11	Journalist	Royal FM	Commercial
Journalist 12	Reporter	<i>The New Times</i>	Government-run
Journalist 13	Editor	<i>Gusenga.org</i>	Religious
Journalist 14	Senior reporter	<i>Izuba Rirashe</i>	Government-run
Journalist 15	Reporter	City Radio	Commercial
Journalist 16	Freelancer	<i>The New Times</i>	Government-run
Journalist 17	News editor	<i>The East African</i>	Commercial
Journalist 18	Reporter	Associated Press	Commercial
Journalist 19	Former journalist	Withheld	Government-run
Journalist 20	Director	Radio Salus	Student-run
Journalist 21	Reporter	Radio Salus	Student-run
Journalist 22	Reporter	<i>Kigali Today/KT Radio</i>	Commercial
Journalist 23	Owner	<i>Great Lakes Voice</i>	Commercial
Journalist 24	Editor	<i>Kigali Today</i>	Commercial

The employer type determined by Bonde et al. (2015) and through interviews.

took place in Kigali and Butare, Rwanda. All interviews were conducted in English and audio recorded with permission from the interviewees. The interviews were semi-structured (Creswell 2003) and consisted of open-ended questions as well as some demographic questions. Journalists were asked to reflect on their own stories, their role in society, and talk about the challenges they faced in navigating the post-genocide societal landscape. The journalists' names are withheld in this paper to prevent any possible punishment for speaking openly about the genocide or about their relationship with the government.

Analysis

For the 24 interviews that were conducted, verbatim transcriptions were created from the audio recordings, which generated 194 pages of transcripts. The shortest interview was 12 minutes and the longest was one hour and 49 minutes, with the average interview length being approximately 45.5 minutes. Each transcript and its accompanying field notes were read multiple times to identify central themes, references, or terminology in order to make meaning of the diverse perspectives—a process which Baxter and Babbie (2003, 367) refer to as the “iterative cycle” of developing codes by “each time revising the coding categories until they capture all” of the relevant data. After an initial set of categories emerged which allowed the data to be organized in a logical and useful way, transcriptions of the interviews were imported as text files into Dedoose, qualitative data analysis software (Lieber and Weisner 2013), to further analyze how frequently and in

what capacities those themes, ideas, and phrases were used. A combination of the data being analyzed by real people and computer-supported analysis software enabled the interviews to be categorized by themes and terminology used as well account for timing/spacing, tone, and body language.

Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the transcripts yielded 1207 applications of 53 codes and subcodes in Dedoose, some of which were used in other papers resulting from these data. After analyzing the transcripts and the frequency of each code relevant to this study, four key themes emerged: (1) Rwandan reporters, especially those who were formally trained, focus on traditional journalistic values such as informing and educating the public, however, journalists who worked for government-run news outlets or commercial outlets that rely on the government to buy advertisements explained their watchdog role function in a more nuanced way; (2) Rwandan journalists take a more active than passive reporting style; (3) Rwandan reporters—even those who work for independent news outlets—highly value a unique role to promote unity and reconciliation; (4) Rwandan journalists use constructive journalism techniques and believe that these tactics have positive impacts on individuals and society.

Rwandan Journalists Value Traditional Roles

RQ1 asked how Rwandan journalists view their roles in 2016, 22 years after the Rwandan media helped perpetrate the genocide. One theme that emerged from the data revealed that journalists in post-genocide Rwanda, especially those who were formally trained and/or work for independent news outlets, view their roles as similar to the roles of journalists in other countries: "It's no different from anywhere else—public interest, reporting in the public interest," said Journalist 17 (interview, June 1, 2016), a formally trained journalist and news editor at the commercial media outlet *The East African*, which is owned by Nation Media Group, the largest private media group in Eastern Central Africa. Journalist 4, who also received a degree in journalism and now works as a senior producer at the privately owned station Radio/TV 10, agreed: "Journalism everywhere in the world is just a watchdog, a voice for the voiceless ... even in Rwanda our role is like that" (interview, May 28, 2016). Journalist 20, an employee at Radio Salus, the National University of Rwanda's student-run radio station, similarly said: "I think the role of a journalist all over the world are the same. Despite sometimes conditions and environment, the role should be the same" (interview, June 2, 2016).

In many ways, the roles Rwandan journalists in this study valued were indeed not unique, especially, but not exclusively, among journalists with a formal journalism education. Specifically, journalists said their roles were to inform, educate, serve as a watchdog, and act as a bridge between the government and the public.

Journalists, no matter whether they held a degree in journalism or worked for private or public news outlets, unequivocally agreed that they have a duty to inform the public. Journalist 7, who earned a bachelor's degree in development studies and then completed journalism trainings before working first for a government-run media house and now at a commercial news outlet, spoke of the importance of this role in his country. "The role of a journalist in Rwanda is to first of all inform the public." This reporter went on to explain that because Rwanda still has a small, less-developed media environment, it remains important

for journalists to inform citizens of what is happening around the country (interview, May 29, 2016). Many journalists echoed this sentiment and expanded on it by saying they not only have a duty to inform, but they have a special responsibility to educate individuals given the country's history.

Our country had a very dark past. And then this time, as a journalist, we have a [*sic*] very hard work of educating people, not only informing them of what is going on around the world but also educating them—new trends, what is going on, how to get money, how to study hard, how to live, how to leave poverty, those kinds of issues—that's the main role of media now days because we ... want people to learn how to prosper. (Journalist 14, formally educated journalist and senior reporter at the government-run newspaper *Izuba Rirashe*, interview, May 30, 2016)

Further, many of the Rwandan journalists we interviewed said they play a watchdog role, holding power accountable.

I think the first role that we do is to inform, and to, secondly, ensure that we keep our public servants in check as well. Because anything that comes up we have to report it. If it's about corruption, if it's about anything that's not supposed to be done and someone has done, we have to report that. So I think we also do that role of making sure people are in check, both private and public. (Journalist 7, reporter, organization withheld, interview, May 29, 2016)

Journalist 23, a journalist at the commercial news website *Great Lakes Voice*, said holding power to account is "the main purpose of the press" (interview, June 5, 2016). Journalist 22, a reporter for *Kigali Today*, a commercial news website that relies on government-funded advertising, explained that government officials are receptive to this role, especially when they read about an issue that they were unaware of: "We can show what is wrong and the government can use [the news story] to correct it (interview, June 2, 2016).

Many Rwandan journalists interviewed said they felt like they serve as a watchdog on government, which seems inconsistent with the fact that the BBC reported on February 4, 2011 that journalists in Rwanda had been jailed for reporting negatively about the government and more recently Reporters Without Borders ranked Rwanda 161 out of 180 countries on the 2016 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders 2016, para. 1). Additionally, the Committee to Protect Journalists published an in-depth special report regarding media restrictions that remain in the country as a result of the genocide (Harber, n.d.). It is clear that reporters in Rwanda do not, and cannot, serve as a government watchdog in the same way that Western journalists serve that role, and the relationship between journalists and the Rwandan government is complex (for more on the relationship between Rwandan journalists and their government, see Sobel and McIntyre 2017).

Some journalists who were interviewed, particularly those who worked for government-supported media outlets or commercial outlets that rely on government-funded advertisements, described their relationship with the government in a more nuanced way, saying they serve as a bridge between the government and the people. "All journalists' role is being a bridge between policy makers, government, and the citizens," said Journalist 3, an editor for the government-run newspaper *Izuba Rirashe* (interview, May 27, 2016). Journalist 15, a reporter for City Radio, a commercial station that relies on both private-sector and government advertisements to operate, explained how he serves that role: "For example, when we invite a minister in a live show to interact with the callers, I think

that's an area our society needs" (interview, May 31, 2016). Journalist 24, an editor for *Kigali Today*, a commercial news website that relies on the government to buy advertisements, described this relationship in a way that's more supportive of government than skeptical of it: "Sometimes we talk about their programs for the government and to help them. It's like we have reach for government and people" (interview, June 5, 2016).

Rwandan Reporters More Active Than Passive

Another theme that emerged from the data clearly addressed RQ2, which asked whether Rwandan journalists tended to take a more active or passive approach. No matter whether they were serving as educators, entertainers, or watchdogs, and no matter whether they worked for private, public, or religious media organizations, Rwandan journalists interviewed in this study valued the more active, participatory style of reporting.

Journalist 23, a journalist at the independent *Great Lakes Voice*, said it is unrealistic to think journalists should be detached observers. "I don't believe in this journalist from the books, from which you happen to ask questions and to just be like—I call them textbook journalists, who are kind of like machines," he said, describing the typical passive journalist who sees him- or herself as a mirror, simply reflecting the world's facts onto society.

Many journalists talked about creating social change through their work, while remaining dedicated to their traditional roles. Journalist 13, an editor at *Gusenga.org*, a Christian news website, said the stories at his news outlet "aim to change somebody's mind/spirit at the same time to be informed" (interview, May 30, 2016). Similarly, Journalist 22 from *Kigali Today*, a commercial news website that relies on government advertisement funding, said she aims to expose and educate, but also to write for change. Journalist 6, a journalist for the commercial station Radio Isango Star, discussed how he simultaneously seeks to play an active role while maintaining traditional journalistic standards:

The role of the media, first of all is to inform people—to make them aware of things or issues that are not true, that they don't have knowledge about ... And then the other [role of a journalist] is the advocate. I like this one—advocating for people. It is a very interesting thing. Advocating makes change through the media even though we had not yet achieved it here in Rwanda, but we are doing in great [*sic*] in terms of advocating for change, we have not yet got where I think we could be. (Interview, May 29, 2016)

These findings are consistent with Hanitzsch et al. (2011), who found that the interventionist-style journalist is more common than the so-called neutral journalist in developing societies and societies in political transitions. Journalists are more willing to promote change in places where change is needed, Hanitzsch et al. (2011) said, and this assertion was supported in the current study. Journalist 13, a *Gusenga.org* editor, put it clearly: "In Rwanda, journalism is a tool to change the mind of people [*sic*]."

A Unique Role: Rwandan Reporters Promote Unity and Reconciliation

In keeping with their more participatory, active mindset, and in addition to their traditional roles, Rwandan journalists from across the spectrum highlighted one role they value that is atypical in Western countries: every interviewee, including those who work for independent outlets, said it is a journalist's duty to promote unity and reconciliation.

“Our first responsibility is to unite people and make sure what media did during the genocide never happens again,” said Journalist 2, an editor for the commercial station Radio/TV 10 (interview, May 27, 2016). Journalist 10, who works for *Umuseke.rw*, a commercial news website that relies on government-funded advertising, agreed. “As a media house we always try to participate in the unity and reconciliation, and we are very sensitive about that” (interview, May 30, 2016). Sensitive, he said, because this role is a direct result of the country’s history. “One of the biggest, I think, objectives for most of the newspapers are to make sure the society get united, like maybe Hutu and Tutsi [populations can improve relations and be more united],” said Journalist 18, a reporter for the independent Associated Press (interview, June 1). Journalist 20, at the student-run station Radio Salus, reiterated that it is the mission of every journalist, and every Rwandan citizen, to promote unity and reconciliation.

We have a responsibility to build and to rebuild a united society, a forward [-looking] society, even if we lost a big number of our citizen [*sic*] [in the genocide]. But our responsibility is just promoting everything which can make our country forward [-looking], not become returning [*sic*] where we were 22 or 25 years ago.

Journalists also expanded on why they felt such a strong obligation to promote unity. Their reasons ranged from practical to personal. Journalist 15, a reporter for City Radio, a commercial news website that relies on private-sector as well as government-funded advertising, brought up the social responsibility theory of the press—the idea that the media has a responsibility to consider society’s best interest. He also acknowledged a financial reason to promote unity and reconciliation:

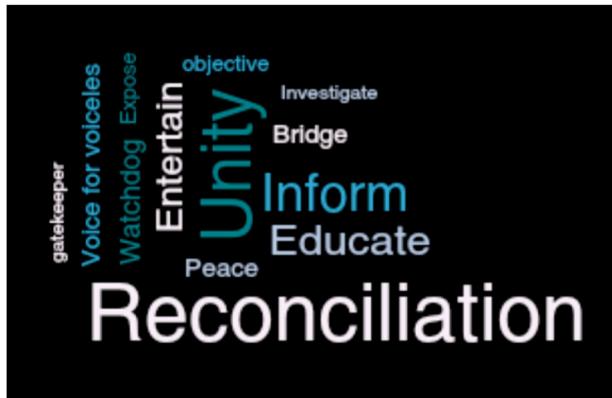
We work for the society, and if we are a commercial radio, so we are attracting advertisers—where are we going to get advertisers when the society is not well, when the economy is not good? You see, we promote unity and reconciliation so as to develop the country and when the country is developed you are going to get more adverts, you see, so it’s our role, and it’s our society. Even though we are journalists, we are part of society. And we have the most powerful tool to promote reconciliation, so we use that tool to rebuild the nation. (Journalist 15)

Journalist 5, a former journalist who asked that the name of his government-run employer be withheld, also mentioned that a unified community would benefit him and his family:

Some people think media or journalists, they are aliens ... I don’t think so. We are part of the community ... So, when it [a story] is something to do with genocide ideology, if I promote it, it produces, it culminates into ... a conflict. I will automatically be affected [along] with my family. I have my kids ... so ... as a media practitioner, I’d always want something that would contribute to the well-being of, you know, the community where I live. (Interview, May 28, 2016)

Journalist 17, an editor at *The East African*, which many journalists consider the only truly private and independent news outlet in Rwanda because it does not rely on government-funded advertising, reiterated the commitment to this role:

We feel we have a second chance at life, you know, to build a new country. So, somehow in everything we do—it doesn’t have to be written somewhere—you just feel that your role is to promote peace and reconciliation.

**FIGURE 1**

A word cloud of the journalistic roles Rwandan journalists mentioned during their interviews

Indeed, the journalists interviewed for this study—including those not working for state-supported news outlets—mentioned this role more often than any other role (see [Figure 1](#) for a word cloud of journalistic roles valued by Rwandan journalists in this study).

Rwandan Reporters Use Constructive Journalism Techniques

To fulfill their duty to promote unity and reconciliation, journalists overwhelmingly employed constructive journalism techniques, starting soon after genocide and continuing today. “When we started our approach was a different one, just like most of the country, so what we focused on was now development journalism ... bringing back the hope” (Journalist 5). Journalist 1, a former radio and television presenter for the religious radio station Voice of Africa, agreed there was a need for more constructive reporting immediately after the genocide. Specifically, he said that audiences wanted to hear a new, more positive message—a message that “can bring peace.” He went on to explain that in the years following the genocide,

People lived with hatred, people want to get revenge, people want to kill, so we needed a new message. The message that they heard [during the genocide] was to kill—“hey, kill these guys! Kill these guys! Kill this one!” So after [the genocide] ... everything changed and the radio came back and it was saying “hey, you can’t kill anybody. Killing is bad. Hey, you need to support the victims.” All of those radio shows I think helped a lot in Rwanda reconciliation to bring peace today. (Journalist 1, interview, May 21, 2016)

Rwandan journalists continue to publish messages of hope and peace in 2016. Responding to RQ3, while the journalists we interviewed rarely used the terms peace journalism, solutions journalism, or restorative narrative, many of the techniques they described using would fall into those categories. In particular, numerous journalistic techniques used by Rwandan reporters and editors can be seen as examples of solutions journalism and restorative narrative at play.

Solutions journalism. Solutions journalism, again, is defined as “rigorous reporting about how people are responding to problems” (Solutions Journalism Network 2015). It includes stories about conflict, but frames the discussion in terms of possible solutions. Although Rwandan reporters did not use the term “solutions journalism,” they described the practice. Journalist 12, a reporter for *The New Times*, the English version of the government-run newspaper *Izuba Rirashye*, said “Journalists can be the promoters of peace. Whenever they report problems or disputes among in the society, they can also ... include some examples of how those conflicts can be solved” (interview, May 30, 2016).

Journalists consistently described ways that they practiced solutions-based news reporting, even those who worked for privately owned media companies. Journalist 17, an editor at *The East African*, considered the most independent news outlet in the country, said the day prior to our interview her news organization hosted the chairperson of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission to discuss ongoing issues surrounding the Catholic Church’s role in the genocide. Some argue that priests who were arrested for participating in the genocide should be stripped of their titles. The country demanded an apology from the Church, and no apology had been given. But instead of solely focusing on the conflict, Journalist 17 talked about how her news outlet shifted to a more forward-looking, solutions-oriented debate: “So when you invite the guests to discuss that, you explore, “Ok, is there a way that you can live with the Church today despite, you know, the past? What lessons can we take from the past?” In this way, she said, the media can help push society forward by encouraging a productive discussion.

Journalist 10, at *Umuseke.rw*, a commercial news website that relies on government advertising, also provided examples of how he has practiced constructive, solutions-focused news reporting. He said during the twentieth anniversary of the genocide, for example, his news outlet published a series of about 15 stories covering people who did not succumb to the pressure to murder their neighbors during the genocide, but rather courageously hid victims. “We showed how those people are heroic, what they did, how they saved thousands of people. So by doing this, you’re also changing some mindsets.” Journalist 10 further provided an example of actual change that occurred in early 2016, after his organization covered a solutions-oriented story about a woman who hid approximately 400 people during the genocide in an effort to save their lives. He said that she ended up living in poverty later in her life, but as a result of these recent news stories, the Rwandan government is building her a home.

Another common way in which journalists attempted to cover the reconstruction of the country in a solutions-based way was by reporting the stories of genocide survivors and perpetrators living together successfully. Journalist 15, a reporter for City Radio, also a commercial station that relies on government-funded advertisements, described how the media cover stories about genocide perpetrators who have been released from jail and are living peacefully in society, and he said those kinds of stories help others.

Restorative narrative. Restorative narrative is another technique Rwandan journalists commonly use in their effort to aid in the country’s redevelopment. This technique, which can overlap with solutions journalism, focuses on reporting the restoration process long after the immediate impact of a tragedy. Decades after the genocide, Rwandan journalists are regularly doing just that.

“Stories about the recovery and reconstruction or resilience of the genocide, they are still being reported,” said Journalist 12, a reporter for the government-run newspaper *The*

New Times. Most often, journalists engage in this practice during genocide commemoration—the annual 100-day-long anniversary of the tragedy, which overlapped with the time these interviews were conducted. “Most of [the] stories during and after [the] commemoration period are about resilience of genocide survivors, mentioning their problems and even what they have achieved after genocide” (Journalist 12). Journalist 17, an editor for independent *The East African*, echoed this practice. “During genocide commemoration ... we have programs around reconciliation, talking about how can you help survivors. On the print side what we do is find survivors, talk about their stories, how are they surviving, look at their welfare, do articles around the welfare of genocide survivors.” For example, a two-page spread published in *The New Times* during the period these interviews were conducted was titled “Mothers and Children Born of Rape: The Agonizing Struggle for Acceptance” and featured women working to overcome the struggle and shame of being raped during the genocide and having their children therefore not accepted in society.

Journalist 7, another reporter for an independent media outlet, further explained that media tell the stories of genocide survivors in an effort to promote unity and reconciliation.

Most of the media now, they talk about the genocide, talking about togetherness, talking about how we are all Rwandan, talking about, “let’s go visit a survivor family, find out how are they doing, give them some food, build them a house.” So yeah, journalists ... give survivors [a platform] to come and talk about their life stories, how they managed to cope since the genocide, what government has done in rebuilding their lives, what the civil society has done, yeah, and what different private people are doing on behalf to help survivors. So that’s our role now. That’s what we do. (Interview, May 29, 2016)

Giving people a platform to tell their genocide stories helped others to feel like they were not alone, said Journalist 4, a producer at Radio/TV 10, a commercial station. Also the reporters maintained balance in this effort. In addition to telling the stories of genocide survivors, Rwandan reporters also talked about how they tell the stories of genocide perpetrators. For example, Journalist 20, a journalist at the student radio station Radio Salus, said his station collaborates with a local non-governmental organization that promotes unity and reconciliation to air a weekly program called “Healing.” “In such program, we have some example asking pardon for those who are convicted for genocide and giving forgiveness,” he said. Journalist 6, who works for the commercial station Radio Isango Star, agreed that the media offer a place for people, both genocide perpetrators and survivors, to ask for peace or redemption. This journalist explained that reading stories about other people’s ability to overcome their painful genocide experiences, specifically the loss of numerous family members, resulted in an increase in forgiveness in Rwandan society.

Journalists also highlighted stories about genocide perpetrators and survivors making peace with each other.

In the Southern Province you have some cooperative for those who have come from prison, convicted of genocide, and victim of, survivors from genocide. If they are working together and they have one cooperative and we broadcast such program, it is just our one example of unity and reconciliation. (Journalist 20)

By publishing stories about forgiveness, resilience, and collaboration, the media inspired individuals to forgive. These restorative narratives remain a powerful way that the media in Rwanda help individuals recover and help society redevelop. Journalist 21,

a journalist at the student radio station Radio Salus, explained that news media, radio in particular, provided the platform for survivors to have dialogues with those who killed their family members during the genocide. This journalist also said that some of these people, the survivors and the perpetrators, ended up visiting each other after sharing their stories on the radio, and that these experiences changed people's thoughts and behavior.

Constructive Journalism Impacts Individuals and Society

The journalists interviewed for this study, whether they worked for private or public news operations, overwhelmingly believed that the media have played a major role in the recovery and reconstruction of the country since the genocide. "People were still sad [after the genocide] ... we don't have a future, we don't have parents," said Journalist 11, a journalist at a self-proclaimed Afro-urban radio station that focuses on music and targets young adults, Royal FM. "But now everyone is happy, thinking there is another mood. They are thinking positively, thinking that after this there is a future" (interview, May 30, 2016). Journalist 13, an editor at the Christian outlet *Gusenga.org*, agreed. "Many people are reconciliated, many people are in a good condition; we have a good atmosphere, they are unified."

This current mood that journalists described is different, they said, than it was shortly after the genocide. In the years following the genocide, "People would meet others and not greet them, and of course it was obvious we could not greet someone who had maybe killed members of the family ... It was very difficult," said Journalist 6, who works for the commercial station Radio Isango Star. But the media, and specific radio programs that some called "radio dramas," changed people's lives, according to Journalist 7 (interview, May 29, 2016). Journalist 6 agreed and explained the role that radio played in informing refugees that it was safe to return home:

Radio drama has been [a] very important tool which worked or contributed to unity and reconciliation. It worked in terms of bringing back the people who had exited the country [during the genocide] ... I can remember the Voice of America and the BBC contributed very much in the bringing back of those people.

Through radio dramas and news stories documenting the lives of those who survived the genocide and those who learned to live productively with the genocide perpetrators, the media made a difference. Journalist 10, at *Umuseke.rw*, a commercial website that relies on government-funded advertisements, talked about the impact of one story he covered—the wedding of a couple whereby one came from a family of genocide victims and the other came from a family of genocide perpetrators. "By showing this, the society started to see that it can happen, it can happen that people can be united again."

Journalists talked about how these types of constructive stories affected not only their audiences, but them personally. "The newspapers played a big role. I used to read some articles from the newspapers and they inspired me. They inspired me how to forgive my enemies. They showed me, "oh wow, this guy did this? Why not me? I can do it, me too" (Journalist 1, former journalist, interview, May 21, 2016). Journalist 13, an editor at the Christian site *Gusenga.org*, echoed this sentiment.

After the Rwandan genocide, I had mind to revenge or to hate extremely someone who tried to kill my family members or my father, and right now I am telling you the truth that we are in good atmosphere. We are changed. We are reconciliated. There are few of them

who are not yet changed, but many people are changed because of journalism or because of that mass media.

Conclusion

This study showed that journalists in modern-day Rwanda, especially those who are formally trained, value many of the same traditional roles valued by journalists in Western countries, such as to inform and educate. Journalists who worked for both government-run and commercial news outlets shared these same values. However, data revealed a difference in how certain types of journalists described their watchdog role. Journalists who worked for government-run outlets, or news outlets that were officially private but that relied on the government for advertising revenue, explained their relationship with the government in a more nuanced way, viewing themselves as a bridge between the government and the public. They explained the relationship as more symbiotic than adversarial.

Overall, however, the Rwandan journalists interviewed for this study valued the same traditional roles valued by Western journalists, with one major exception—Rwandan journalists feel a strong obligation to promote unity and reconciliation, a direct result of having survived the genocide and wanting to prevent a similar tragedy from reoccurring. Every journalist interviewed for this study mentioned this role function, which is arguably the most interesting finding of this study. What makes this finding particularly striking is that journalists who worked for government-run news outlets and those who worked for commercial outlets expressed equal dedication to promoting unity and reconciliation. In other words, even those journalists who are the most committed to a free press and exposing wrongdoing will prioritize the good of their society over their commitment to traditional, Western journalistic roles. This finding also points to the possibility that non-Western media environments place more value on societal-good than do Western media organizations. Future research should continue to explore the roles of journalists in developing nations, particularly those recovering from conflict.

This study further found that since the genocide, reporters have been fulfilling their duty to promote unity and reconciliation by practicing constructive journalism. They have employed solutions journalism and restorative narrative techniques, regularly covering stories that inspire and foster forgiveness, and they believe these stories have helped individuals recover and have helped restore a peaceful society. “In the post-genocide Rwanda, that is our journalism, you know, that is our attitude generally toward journalism ... So if you look at our coverage over time it’s been trying to reemphasize that there’s hope, there’s resilience,” said Journalist 17, an editor for *The East African*.

This peacebuilding role of Rwandan journalists can be understood as an example of Bro’s (2008) definition of an active journalist, but also as an example of McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour’s (2016) contextualist journalist, that being a socially responsible journalist who aims to provide context in his or her stories and considers society’s well-being during the newsmaking process. Data from this study thus demonstrate that the notion of a journalist’s role as a contextualist is not only an American practice.

This journalistic duty to promote peace in Rwanda is not idealistic; it is vital, given the county’s past. Therefore, this role often supersedes traditional role functions. As a result, media coverage in Rwanda is less critical than in Western countries and the country is regarded as having little press freedom. But journalists interviewed for this study pointed to the difficulty in playing the watchdog role in Rwanda, and even a journalist at the

most independent news outlet in the country considered the idea that perhaps unity is a more important goal given the country's history.

I can understand why somebody else would look at it and say, "but this is not really professional journalism, you know, because you're supposed to be the watchdog and, you know, focus on criticism as opposed to, you know, just pointing out, this is working, this is working, this is working." But I think, for me, coming to that conclusion would sort of not take into account the history of the country. (Journalist 17)

However, Skovsgaard and Bro (2017, 61–62) explain that "the term 'role' is a metaphor adopted and adapted from theater where persons must act out a character based on expectations written into the script of the play." In other words, roles are often dictated by societal expectations. In the Rwandan context, the peacebuilding, active, contextualist role of a journalist can be understood as reflective of societal expectations of unity-building in the post-genocide era. If "journalists claim legitimacy by adhering to roles, which are based on the journalists' impression and interpretation of a set of expectations" (62), we might expect to see a rise in the use of constructive journalism techniques and active roles amongst journalists in times of peacebuilding and unity creation.

Despite its contributions, the findings of this study are limited in that only English-speaking journalists in Rwanda's largest cities were interviewed. While we reached saturation during the interview process, indicating our findings were not due to chance, future research should expand this line of inquiry by including journalists from more rural areas. However, due to Rwanda's particular history, these findings cannot be generalized to journalists in other countries, though future research should compare these findings to journalists in other post-conflict regions.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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