At Fault: How the Media Portrayed the Rwandan Genocide

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Introduction: Portrayal of the People

When covering a story in any part of the world, the portrayal of the people living there is extremely important. There is a tendency in the press to portray Africa as a backwards part of the world, and despite its supposed good intentions, it actually keeps Africa from moving forward. In the case of the Rwandan Genocide, there has been a mix of comprehensive and insufficient coverage of what took place and of the people who were involved, though the latter definitely outweighs the former. The very beginning of a 1994 *Time* cover story, for example, is of a missionary saying “There are no devils left in Hell…they are all in Rwanda” (Gibbs). Why is a missionary, and not a Rwandan, being quoted? In fact, of the fourteen quotes used in the article, only three come from Rwandans. It is interesting to note that an article about the Rwandan Genocide bases the majority of its information on what was provided by non-Rwandan onlookers. More importantly, the allusion to the Devil completely ignores the true political and social causes of the genocide. The quote leads the reader to believe that either all Rwandans are evil or that the problem is beyond their control. This is just one example of how the media failed to accurately report the genocide and the events leading up to its occurrence.

After analyzing the media – newspapers, magazines, documentaries, books, and any other medium that provides information to the public – three main themes become apparent: (1) Biblical allusions, specifically to the Devil, help explain why the genocide occurred; (2) the Rwandans are dependent on the West; and (3) the Rwandans are tribal and primitive. Through these three themes, the media creates a widening rift between Africa and the West because it dehumanizes Africans. However, some progress has been made to provide a more comprehensive image of Africa.
When the Media Gets it Wrong: the Three Themes

The first theme obscures the conflict in religious dialogue and offers only a handful of other reasons as to why the genocide took place. This first theme may be found in a variety of sources ranging from magazine covers to documentaries. It may be argued that magazine covers are especially more influential than the articles found inside because an image is more likely to make an impression than a quote. Moreover, a person simply passing by a newsstand will see the cover and not read the accompanying article. This places greater emphasis on what message the cover conveys. Figure 1 shows magazine covers that were both released on August 1, 1994, and the words “apocalypse” and “Hell” are printed over pictures of dead bodies being piled on top of each other. “Hell” is written in big, black, capitalized letters, and “apocalypse” is a rather strong word to use since it connotes the end of the world. Notice, also, that in the Newsweek cover, part of the picture extends beyond the black frame, as if bringing the genocide closer to the audience. Both magazines also have a child at the forefront to show that children are not spared and to perhaps tug on the heartstrings a bit more. Additionally, the dead bodies have become relegated as mere objects because there is nothing to distinguish them from each other.

But is this sensationalism effective in portraying to the Western audience what really is happening in Rwanda? The Time article at least informs the reader that the picture is from a refugee camp at the Rwandan border (small detail at bottom, right-hand corner), but the Newsweek article makes no mention of where the picture was taken. The trend for both, though, seems to be to take the most gut-wrenching image to use as a cover. Calling the genocide “Hell on Earth” and an “apocalypse” completely overlooks the years of colonialism and political
instability that helped lead to the conflict. Sensationalizing the genocide detracts from the gravity of the event, and it has the counterintuitive effect of losing audience attention because the media has been sensationalizing tragedies for years (Chalk). The shock value has greatly decreased, but more importantly, substance and the quality of reporting have also decreased.

PBS documentary *Ghosts of Rwanda* (2004) also makes the mistake of trivializing the genocide by not digging deeper. A former Hutu soldier named Gitera Rwamuhizi says:

“When Satan is using you, you lose your mind. We are not ourselves. You couldn’t be normal and you started butchering people for no reason. We had been attacked by the Devil” (*Ghosts of Rwanda*).

Although this quote may seem like it provides more insight into the inner workings of a Hutu soldier, it actually provides an excuse for him. As he is uttering this quote, his face is unapologetic and he seems a bit blasé about the entire matter, making one believe that perhaps he really is evil. His interview is cut into several pieces and alternated with scenes from a separate interview with Valentina Iribagiza, a survivor from the same attack that Rwamuhizi participated in. Juxtaposing the interviews shows a clear message that Rwamuhizi is bad and Iribagiza is good, especially because Rwamuhizi is emotionless and Iribagiza is still suffering from the memory of the attack. Though the crimes he committed were atrocious, it is important to remember that not all Hutus were killers. Similarly, “‘Taken Over By Satan,’” a BBC news article, quotes Rwamuhizi but never moves past the Biblical allusion. Placing the conflict in this Biblical, God vs. Devil context completely ignores the political, social, and economic factors that contributed to the killing of 800,000 people (Gourevitch 3). Why is a supernatural reference needed if the genocide can be intelligently understood by studying the history and political atmosphere of the country?
The second theme present in the media is Western dependency, specifically that the West was needed to solve Rwanda’s problems. In 1997, a study of magazine articles that were about the Rwandan Genocide was conducted by Melissa A. Wall, a professor from California State University – Northridge whose research deals with Africa in the media. She found that the headlines describing possible solutions to the genocide depicted the French as the rescuer. Some of these headlines include “The Horrific Scars of Rwanda’s Civil War: France Sends in Troops to Stem the Carnage” and “Nice Idea, Wrong Army, Rwanda: Are the French the Ones to Make Peace?” (Kiley, Wall 131). Moreover, in May and June 1994, the New York Times printed articles with the following headlines: “French in Rwanda Try to Aid Civilians” and “French Troops Enter Rwanda in Aid Mission” (“French,” Simons). The four headlines portray the French as a proactive helper and potential peacemaker. All but the first, however, fail to mention how the French supported the Hutu extremists. Not only did they show political backing, but the French also allowed their troops to train members of the interahamwe, the dominant Hutu militia group responsible for the majority of the killings (DeForges). By showing open support, the French essentially gave its tacit approval and made the killers believe that they could get away with murder (Shake Hands). The French were definitely complicit, but not all articles address their involvement in Rwanda.

Along with the French, the Belgians are also considered to be heroes. In fact, when ten Belgian peacekeepers were killed in Rwanda while protecting Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana, they were turned into martyrs and Belgium was seen as a savior that sacrificed its men (Shake Hands, Schmidt). The New York Times also printed an article called “Strife in Rwanda: France and Belgium; France and Belgium Send Troops to Rescue but Not to Intervene.” The headline is misleading because the troops are rescuing their own people and not the
Rwandans, but it nevertheless describes Belgium positively. However, the article never makes mention of Belgian colonialism and how it exacerbated the ethnic tension between the Hutus and the Tutsis (Gourevitch 48). So-called scientists were sent out to Rwanda to weigh the people, to examine their eyes, and to measure the size of their heads and the protuberance of their noses (Figure 2). They concluded that the minority Tutsi fit the European model of nobility and that the majority Hutu were more “coarse” and “bestial” in nature (Gourevitch, 55-6). Moreover, the Belgians instituted identity cards that showed one’s ethnicity. By systematizing ethnicity and incorporating “race science” in proving Tutsi superiority, the Belgians created a greater tension between the two groups and used it to their advantage. In 1959, when 20,000 people were killed in a precursor to the genocide, the Belgians encouraged the fighting and strategically played the two groups off of each other to create a buffer zone between themselves and the Rwandans. This necessary historical background is often omitted.

Although these previous two themes are widespread in the media, nothing is as ubiquitous as the third theme – that the Rwandans are tribal and primitive. In one segment of *Shake Hands With the Devil* (2004), a documentary created by UN peacekeeping General Romeo Dallaire, there is a voiceover of an American reporter who says “Western nations are racing to remove their nationals from the country and its tribal warfare” (*Shake Hands*). The accompanying video is of plane, most likely that of Western troops, skidding to a halt on a runway. The smoke from the plane, the noise of the tires against the asphalt, and the reporter’s voice – they all emphasize the urgency to get all the white people out, as if they need to be saved
from tribalism. Framing the situation in this urgency shows that tribalism and anything associated with it are bad.

The use of the words “tribal” or “tribalism” implies a sense of primitivism within the Rwandan community. It would be more accurate to call them ethnic groups or opposing political groups, but they are hardly ever called by those names. The Hutus are often depicted as savages or barbaric animals because of their crude forms of weapons – machetes, stones, and clubs studded with nails (Keane). The interahamwe was compared to a pack of dogs by saying that they were “let off their leash” when they attacked the Tutsis (Wall 128). Furthermore, as Figure 3 shows, *Ghosts of Rwanda* characterized the interahamwe as constantly drunk and looking somewhat clownish because of their colorful clothes (*Ghosts of Rwanda*). The documentary shows images of them joyriding through the streets with one of their members hanging off the side of the car, almost as if they were reckless teenage boys. This characterization, the clothes, the weapons, the animal comparison – these show that Rwanda is viewed as uncivilized and primitive.

Furthering the “tribal” image, many news articles also depict the conflict as being “ancient and visceral,” saying that the Hutu and Tutsi were trying to “settle scores that…stretch[ed] back for centuries” (Gibbs). A *New York Times* article with the headline “Terror Convulses Rwandan Capital as Tribes Battle” also states that the soldiers were simply “looking to settle old tribal scores” (Schmidt).¹ These articles convey the sense that the tribal warfare is really just petty fighting.

¹ The article also makes the egregious error of incorrectly spelling President Paul Kagame’s name; it spelled it as Kagama instead. However, it is unsure as to whether this incorrect spelling is only present in the online version of the article or if that is how it was originally published in the newspaper.
between different tribes. It is true that a social hierarchy was existent during the mid-nineteenth century, but “ancient” is an exaggeration. The images painted by the media dehumanize the Rwandans, and thus Africa moves even further backwards because the world views it in that light.

When the Media Gets it Right: Showing the Other Side

Thankfully, though, not all representations of Africa follow the pattern of the three themes. In Philip Gourevitch’s book, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed with Our Families*, the author tells the story of a man who confessed to the murder of teenage girls at two schools in Gisenyi and in Kibuye. During the attacks on these schools, the girls were ordered to separate themselves into two groups: Hutu and Tutsi. Surprisingly, the girls refused. They were subsequently shot to death, but they died calling themselves Rwandans. The last line of the book is the following: “mightn’t we all take some courage from the example of those brave Hutu girls who could have chosen to live, but chose instead to call themselves Rwandans?” (Gourevitch 352-3). By ending the book with this question, Gourevitch provides a hopeful image of humanity during a time that would otherwise seem hopeless; this story portrays those girls as heroes for being brave enough to do what most adults could not do. There is an optimism here that is quite rare in the media. In the same 1994 *Time* article that was mentioned earlier, journalist Nancy Gibbs writes about the Hutu mayor of Butare who married a Tutsi. He was given the choice to either die or to save his family if he allowed his Tutsi in-laws to die. He failed to do what those teenage girls did and chose to save himself. This is a stark contrast from the book, for it focuses instead on the negative aspects of the genocide. The book chooses to
show a redeeming quality about the Rwandans, but the magazine article further adds to the barrage of negativity.

Not all articles, however, can be thought of as inadequate, subjective news sources. Ten years after the genocide, in 2004, the *London Times* published an article called “The West Did Too Much, Not Too Little, in Rwanda.” In it, writer Mike Hume asserts that what occurred in Rwanda was the result of too much Western involvement. He then discusses Belgian colonialism, French aid to the Hutu extremists, and an inflexible World Bank policy that only aggravated Rwanda’s troubles. By accusing the West for viewing Rwanda only “as a simple moral parable about good and evil in the Dark Continent,” Hume stresses the importance of understanding the root of Rwanda’s problems. He also hits an incredibly important point when he theorizes that the religious framing of the genocide is actually a “form of self-flattery” for the West. By saying that evil persists in Rwanda, the West perpetuates the second theme and assumes that it has the mission of saving the people there from their evil ways (Hume). More articles like these are greatly needed.

Hume’s article is reinforced by *Shake Hands With the Devil*, which portrays the Rwandans as human beings and not as savages. The documentary shows video footage of the 10th anniversary ceremony of the genocide in Rwanda. Former leader of the Rwandan Patriotic (RPF) and current President Paul Kagame is shown giving a speech, in which he condemns the “powerful countries who are so arrogant that they can dictate what happens in every other country.” Showing President Kagame in a position of authority tells the audience that the Rwandans are

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2 RPF stands for Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Tutsi rebel army. The genocide ended only when the RPF gained control of the country.
not the weak, helpless creatures found in the newspaper articles and that they will no longer tolerate Western imperialism. Another important scene in the documentary is one that shows students at the University of Rwanda in Butare gathering in the stadium to listen to Dallaire’s speech. Because education is a sign of development, this scene casts a positive light on the Rwandans. Offering a glimpse of university life counters the former portrayal of the Rwandans as stupid and barbaric (Shake Hands). Most importantly, though, the documentary offers a glimpse of Rwandan culture: choirs singing (Figure 4), women wearing traditional dresses, and locals speaking Kinyarwanda, the chief spoken language, etc.

Showing a people’s culture is important because, in the case of Rwanda, it shows that they have progressed past petty tribal fighting. Culture is a sign of civilization because a certain set of beliefs, customs, and values come to define a group of people; culture gives people a distinct, unique identity. Political scientist Irina Vasilenko argues that the concepts of civilization and culture are quite similar because they both include “the liberation of the human spirit, the flourishing of science and art… [and] an enlightened society, as contrasted to savagery and barbarism” (Vasilenko). By taking the time to show Rwanda’s culture, Shake Hands With the Devil portrays the Rwandans as people and not as animals.

Who Is Being Quoted or Interviewed?

Another main aspect of the media to be conscious of is the people who are interviewed and quoted. Unfortunately, there are statistically more quotes from white government officials and aid workers than from the Rwandans themselves (Wall 124-5). Wall’s study found that aid workers were quoted 22% of the time, Western officials 13% of the time, and local people 21%. In the PBS documentary, the disparity is even greater. People who are interviewed include the
following: former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, missionary Carl WIlkens, Harvard Professor Samantha Power, and 22 other non-Rwandans. In comparison, only six Rwandans are interviewed. While it may have been difficult at the time to find locals who would be willing to speak to the press, these are still disproportionate numbers. *Shake Hands With the Devil*, though, seems to be moving in the forward direction again by providing fuller coverage of what happened. An improvement from *Ghosts of Rwanda*, it interviews eleven non-Rwandans and eight Rwandans, including President Kagame, the Mayor of Kicukiro, and Ntaganira Damascene, a genocide survivor.

**The Bigger Picture: the African Continent**

What happened in Rwanda is specific only to Rwanda, but is it fair to generalize its struggle to the entire African continent? The press seems to think so. Though Africa is comprised of over fifty separate countries, the press treats all of them the same. A 2006 article on Darfur entitled “Desperation in Darfur: Can the United Nations now succeed where African peacekeepers have failed?” adopts an attitude that only the West can save the region from descending into more turmoil, a common theme in Rwanda’s news coverage. It says that in 2002 the African Union (AU) created a peace and security council so that, “for once…Africa would [solve] its own problems.” The use of “for once” implies that Africa has neither tried nor is capable of mediating conflicts. The article ends with U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan asking President Bush for help, furthering the misconception that the West is Africa’s only savior (Morrison). Moreover, though African nations are members of the United Nations, the U.N. is considered a largely Western entity. For example, the five permanent seats are occupied by the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China; these five, dubbed the P5, are the
only countries that possess the power to veto draft resolutions (Reilly). In 2005, the AU pushed for the creation of two more permanent seats for African nations, but so far the P5 still remain (Global Policy Forum).

The press continues this mistreatment and generalization of African events in another article originally published by FoxNews.com. With the headline “What’s Wrong with Africa,” the title alone is disparaging. The article takes each nation’s own shortcomings and generalizes them to the entire continent. Though no region of the world is free from problems, this article is grossly one-sided and shows no objectivity. The problem in Kenya, it says, is police bribery; in Zaire, it is corrupt politicians; in Nigeria, human rights offenders are let off too easily. The problem with South Africa is that it is too anti-American and thus hurts its chances of receiving much-needed American investment. Tupy, the author, takes the “Western savior” theme to another level by asking why “some African countries pick meaningless fights with the United States and engage in grandstanding on issues that win them no friends and make many Americans question whether Africa is worth caring for” (Tupy). This makes it seem like the Americans are doing Africa a favor even though it is not really worth it. This question of worth again puts Africa down and perpetuates the notion that the West is superior. Tupy highlights all of these problems and implies that Africa as a whole is corrupt and immoral, and that it needs the United States. Even though the countries of Africa all have their own distinct culture and language, they are lumped together as “African.”

**Implications: Lack of Information and Who Gets Blamed**

This attitude of Africa not being worthy of U.S. aid may help explain why it is often forgotten or not accorded one’s full attention. The following illustrates how Rwanda was not
thought of as an urgent matter prior to the outbreak of the genocide. The mentality was that General Dallaire needed merely to maintain the Arusha Peace Accords, the peace agreement that allowed Tutsi officials to have seats within the Hutu government (Power 336).

“We had very very little information, knowledge of the background to Rwanda – its history, its culture…what had taken place in the country since independence or even before independence, and especially even in the last couple of years. So we went in quite blind” (Ghosts of Rwanda).

This quote is from Major Brent Beardsley, military assistant to General Dallaire. It is quite shocking that this was the level of attention that was given to a U.N. peacekeeping mission. How was peace supposed to have been achieved if the General himself did not even understand the full complexity of Rwanda’s history? Even in Shake Hands With the Devil Dallaire admits that he was ill-prepared; when he became commander of the mission he was asked if he knew where Rwanda was and he responded “I think it’s in Africa somewhere” (Shake Hands). This lack of general background knowledge is also common within journalism. Reporters “arrive with little or no knowledge of the country’s history, politics and culture and few if any local sources” (Wall 122). A reporter is assigned to a story and is expected to start from scratch. Language barriers also contribute to the problem. Though it should be the reporter’s responsibility to his homework before beginning a story, should all the blame be cast on the reporter?

French journalist Anne Chaon, who was in Rwanda in 1994, says that the blame must be cast on the collective media and not on the individual journalist. Although she too arrived in Rwanda with very little knowledge of the country, she raises some intelligent points, most notably that “media are businesses” (Chaon). For news companies, profit is the goal and reporting in Africa is not profitable because the events there are typecast as fighting, famine, and disease – recurring, sensationalist topics that the public is already aware of in Africa. This may
partially explain why the *New York Times*, an internationally respected news source, only has four foreign bureaus—Nairobi, Johannesburg, Cairo, Dakar—in all of Africa (Cooper). What is the point of adding more bureaus if it is financially risky? However, this situation then leaves the journalists alone in a foreign country without much support from their company. How can the journalist be effective if he is, in a sense, abandoned by his own organization? Chaon is correct in placing some of the blame on the collective media.

On a larger scale, though, what makes something more profitable or more newsworthy to the public is directly influenced by how media presents information. News companies can complain that Africa is not profitable, but they are the ones who have made it that way. People have been reading about tribalism in Africa for years; that interpretation of Africa’s conflicts is pervasive. However, as shown through various examples, the public is not receiving the full story; there is more to be uncovered than so-called ancient tribalism and the work of supernatural forces. The media packages Africa into a box, and that packaging is not only what the public is tired of reading about, but also what it is duped into believing. The media perpetuates this “Africa is not worthy” notion, and because of that, it hurts Africa’s progress and makes the world still view it as backwards.

**Levels of Guilt**

It is interesting to note that certain forms of media are more guilty than others. Clearly, print media such as magazines and newspapers provides the worst and most subjective reporting. The PBS documentary, *Ghosts of Rwanda*, does not provide a comprehensive image of what took place, but Dallaire’s documentary, *Shake Hands With the Devil*, makes sure to portray Rwandans as a people. And books like Gourevitch’s *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We
*Will be Killed with Our Families* do an excellent job of weaving the historical, social, political, and economic viewpoints together to thoroughly explain what happened in Rwanda.

Print media, though it fared the worst out of the different types of media analyzed, has a greater duty to provide more balanced and comprehensive news coverage. Because people no longer have time to watch a two-hour documentary or to read a full-length book, they resort to skimming the newspapers and browsing through magazines while waiting in line at the grocery store. If those two sources are where they receive most of their information, they probably have a misguided, skewed perception of African events because everything becomes categorized into three themes: (1) Biblical allusions, specifically to the Devil, help explain why the genocide occurred; (2) the Rwandans are dependent on the West; and (3) the Rwandans are tribal and primitive. Although, as discussed earlier, articles like Mike Hume’s accurately report events and portray the Rwandans favorably, these types of articles are sorely lacking. There must be a greater push for improvement and change within the media.

**Conclusion: Will We Remember?**

Thirteen years have passed, but what do people really remember about the Rwandan Genocide? Though it is unfair to say that the world has not moved forward at all in the realm of human rights, the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide is eerily reminiscent of the aftermath of the 1915 Armenian genocide. Approximately 1.5 million Armenians were killed by the Turkish government, but the event seems to have been largely forgotten. In fact, in an attempt to justify the Holocaust, Hitler once said “Who today speaks of the massacre of the Armenians?” (Power 23). Although it is frightening to confront the question, it must still be asked: who today still speaks of the Rwandan Genocide?
If there is one thing that the public must learn from these tragedies, it is the importance of remembering. One way to do that is to read about it in the paper or to watch a news program. This means that the media – magazines, newspapers, documentaries, books, and any other medium that provides information to the public – has the responsibility to not only accurately report the news, but to do it in a way that does not dehumanize the people involved. The core purpose of the New York Times Company, according to its website, is “to enhance society by creating, collecting, and distributing high-quality news, information, and entertainment” (New York Times). It has created, collected, and distributed news but has done a poor job of enhancing society: the three themes currently present in the media must no longer be present. This simplification of events widens the gap between Africa and the West because, even in the 21st century, Africa is viewed as a charity case or as a mission to expel evil. Though progress has been made, the coverage in Darfur suggests that reform is not occurring fast enough. The media must not be allowed to repeat its past mistakes.

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3 The New York Times Company is extremely influential because it owns The New York Times, 17 other newspapers, eight television stations, two New York radio stations, and 40 websites.