

THE RESPONSIBILITY TO REPORT

A PLEA TO ADOPT AN ETHIC OF RESPONSIBILITY TOWARD ALL OF HUMANITY

by Allan Thompson

Hands rose up from the grave to grasp each coffin, as if the dead were welcoming the remains of the genocide victims. The simple wooden boxes contained bones recovered from mass graves and pit latrines so that they could be re-interred during ceremonies marking the 10th anniversary of the Rwanda genocide.

It was 7 April 2004 in Kigali, and a gaggle of television crews, reporters and photographers jostled for space around a concrete tomb where victims of the 1994 genocide were finally being given a dignified burial. Earlier, pall bearers had descended into the crypt, climbing down a ladder so they could be in place to receive the coffins. The boxes were gingerly passed one by one into their final resting place at Rwanda's national memorial to the 1994 slaughter.

Ten years after the genocide, Rwanda was still burying its dead and representatives of the international media were there, watching. Heading the dignitaries assembled to take part in the ceremony was Paul Kagame, president of Rwanda and in 1994, leader of the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front, which ended the genocide and took over the country. Retired Canadian General Roméo Dallaire, who led the ill-fated United Nations mission to Rwanda during the catastrophe, joined Kagame at the ceremony.

Both Kagame and Dallaire could have been forgiven for asking a pointed question as they regarded the international media throng gathered for the ceremonies: where were the world's media a decade earlier when a campaign to exterminate the Tutsi minority and Hutu moderates resulted in the massacre of more than 800 000 innocents?

In hindsight, the media shorthand for the Rwanda genocide goes something like this: "The world community failed to intervene and abandoned Rwanda while dead bodies clogged the rivers and piled up on roadsides." These events were reported by the news media, but not very prominently. When the media finally descended on the story, it was to cover the cholera epidemic in refugee camps across the border in Zaire, camps populated by Hutu who fled Rwanda at the tail end of the genocide.

Looking back, it is easy to see what the news media did wrong, both inside Rwanda

and without. Many journalists within Rwanda were implicated in the killings. Hate media were instrumental in the extermination campaign. International news media misconstrued or downplayed the Rwanda story.

Political figures, such as US President Bill Clinton, later claimed that they did not have enough information to fully grasp what was going on in Rwanda. More likely, because the public was not very engaged by the Rwanda story, there was little pressure for leaders to do anything.

More than a decade and a half later, are we any wiser? What has changed and what have we learned from what went wrong?

In part, the answer lies in Darfur, the region in western Sudan widely acknowledged to be a humanitarian and human rights tragedy of the first order. In the face of reliable accounts of what is at best ethnic cleansing and at worst genocide – a situation that some have described as Rwanda in slow motion – the world community has done little. Perhaps, just perhaps, content analysis would demonstrate that Darfur has registered on the media radar screen to a greater degree than did Rwanda. But it has not become a mega-story, or a media sensation. It has not captured our imaginations. And that signals, once again, a media failure.

For what it's worth, the international community has shown a measure of contrition with regard to the events of 1994. Rwanda is now a synonym for the world community's failure to intervene in the face of gross violations of human rights. And in large part because of Rwanda, a new paradigm emerged and eventually won formal recognition on the world stage.

The Canadian-inspired doctrine called "the responsibility to protect" was formally adopted by the United Nations in September 2005. (Whether it is ever put into force is another matter.) The doctrine was set out in the December 2001 report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty. It overturns the notion of absolute national sovereignty when it comes to massive violations of human rights and genocide, marking the first time that state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs have been qualified.

In effect, the UN declaration enshrines in international law the notion that the world community has a right to intervene – a responsibility to protect – to stop a government from massive violation of the human rights of its citizens.

But the document is virtually silent on the role of the news media, and there is little discussion of the part journalists and news organisations could or should play in the face of



UN Photo/Stuart Price



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the kind of atrocities witnessed in Rwanda.

All these years later, we don't yet seem to have figured out that part of the puzzle. Perhaps it is time to advance a new paradigm for journalists: "the responsibility to report".

If we cannot adequately address the kind of structural constraints that handicapped the media in the case of Rwanda, at least we can deal with the behavioural aspects of the media – the way individual journalists conduct themselves.

What lessons have the international media drawn from the debacle of Rwanda? Like other international actors, the news media have been slow to acknowledge their failures during the genocide. Journalists tend to look forward, not back. And history continues to repeat itself. Stories like Rwanda continue to be downplayed. Year after year, the international news media devote less and less attention to foreign affairs, with the exception of the big stories, such as the war in Iraq, the war on terror or the disaster du jour.

The shocking thing about these findings is that they no longer shock us. They haven't shocked us for a long time. In fact, we now take this kind of media coverage for granted. There is a vast academic literature on media coverage of international affairs and more specifically, paltry coverage of Africa and the developing world.



EC/ECHO/Peter Holdsworth



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But the problem with media prescriptions is that they are often so general that they are beyond implementation. In essence, the prescriptions end up being variants on the symptoms: news organisations should devote more resources to coverage of Africa and the developing world; the media should train more professionals in coverage of conflict and development issues; news from the developing world should be given more prominence on news pages and in broadcasts; news organisations should deploy more full-time foreign correspondents; rather than just covering wars, the media should pay more attention before a conflict erupts and after the fact, examine efforts at conflict resolution and ways the news media could actually support reconciliation and peace.

All of these prescriptions are really just reworded descriptions of the problem. Clearly, we need more information and more first-hand, eyewitness reporting from places like Darfur.

We need to hear more and different voices. But how can we make that happen? Who moves the media? And what is “the media” anyway? How can we talk coherently about such a disparate, diverse group of commercial and state enterprises that differ vastly across continents? Media organisations are populated by individual journalists, editors, media executives and others.

More broadly speaking, “the media” includes anyone who can apply some code of professional standards and disseminate news

and information. So is it even realistic to look for discernible patterns of coverage in the media with an eye to recommending a different course of action?

The crux of the Rwanda piece is that more extensive media coverage might have made a difference, might have pushed international actors to do something in the spring of 1994. Roméo Dallaire argues that media coverage of Rwanda never gained momentum during the genocide, never reached the kind of critical mass needed to move leaders. That momentum only emerged in July 1994, when media descended in droves to cover the plight of those living in the refugee camps in Goma and sparked an international response.

Not surprisingly, journalists largely reflect the societies in which they live and share the same ambivalence toward what is going on outside their borders, as well as the same focus on domestic issues and selected international issues that are deemed to be relevant.

In my view, it is up to individual journalists to crawl outside their skin, to get beyond that domestic focus and to exercise their role fully. Just as nation states have begrudgingly acknowledged the responsibility to protect – driven by the simple realisation that we have a responsibility to others – I think journalists, as individuals, must accept the responsibility to report and take action themselves.

My simple point is that we’ve been lamenting for three decades how “the media” fail to cover stories like Rwanda and Darfur. I echo the lament, which is backed up by a stream of qualitative and quantitative research. But normative prescriptions for what “the media” should be doing differently have little application.

Could it be that everyone is going about it the wrong way, looking top-down at the media, which is an amorphous, disparate beast anyway, when they should be looking from the ground up, at individual journalists and the role they can play?

British journalist-cum-politician Martin Bell (1998) has spoken about the “journalism of attachment”, a call for empathy with humanity among journalists, something that some regard as an affront to the classical notion of journalistic objectivity and neutrality. But surely journalists can talk about an ethic of responsibility, a responsibility to report on people, places and events that have been excluded from the agenda of news organisations for myriad reasons. Surely individual journalists can try to make a difference, even if news organisations and the media are unable or unwilling to fully exercise their role.

At every opportunity I have urged development assistance agencies, government and nongovernmental organisations, and advocates interested in media coverage of the developing world to invest in individual journalists – those new to the profession but also veterans – by endowing research grants, fellowships and awards that make it possible for journalists to visit the developing world or to explore areas that otherwise fall into that nether world of media absence. In my experience, journalists exposed to the developing world want to go back again and again. And their reporting can make a difference.

We need more voices, more first-hand accounts of events from journalists in the North and the South. Technology makes the arguments about newsroom budgets increasingly less relevant. It is much, much cheaper to travel to the developing world and do journalism than it used to be. And why not use more locally-based correspondents as well? Isn’t it about time that Western news organisations re-examined their assumption that visiting foreign correspondents are of more value than locally-based journalists? And Africans don’t just need to tell their stories to the outside world. They need to tell them to each other.

It is difficult to fashion a strategy to deal with the structural flaws in the news media that resulted in the failure to provide adequate coverage of the Rwanda genocide or the crisis in Darfur. But surely that difficulty should not prevent us from trying to change the structure one small piece at a time, through the work of individual journalists.

This is a rallying cry to those who call themselves journalists, who practise this profession. Rwandan journalist Thomas Kamilindi recounts an encounter he had in Côte d’Ivoire with a group of young reporters who wondered how to avoid being drawn into the hate media in their country. Kamilindi’s admonition was simple: stand up and be reporters, do your job.

He is echoed by Roméo Dallaire, who reminds journalists that they can be powerful individually and collectively and must stay dynamic in the search for truth. This essay ends on a simple note, a plea to journalists: do your job, use the power that this profession affords and take up your responsibilities, starting with the responsibility to report.

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