

# REPORTING CONFLICT

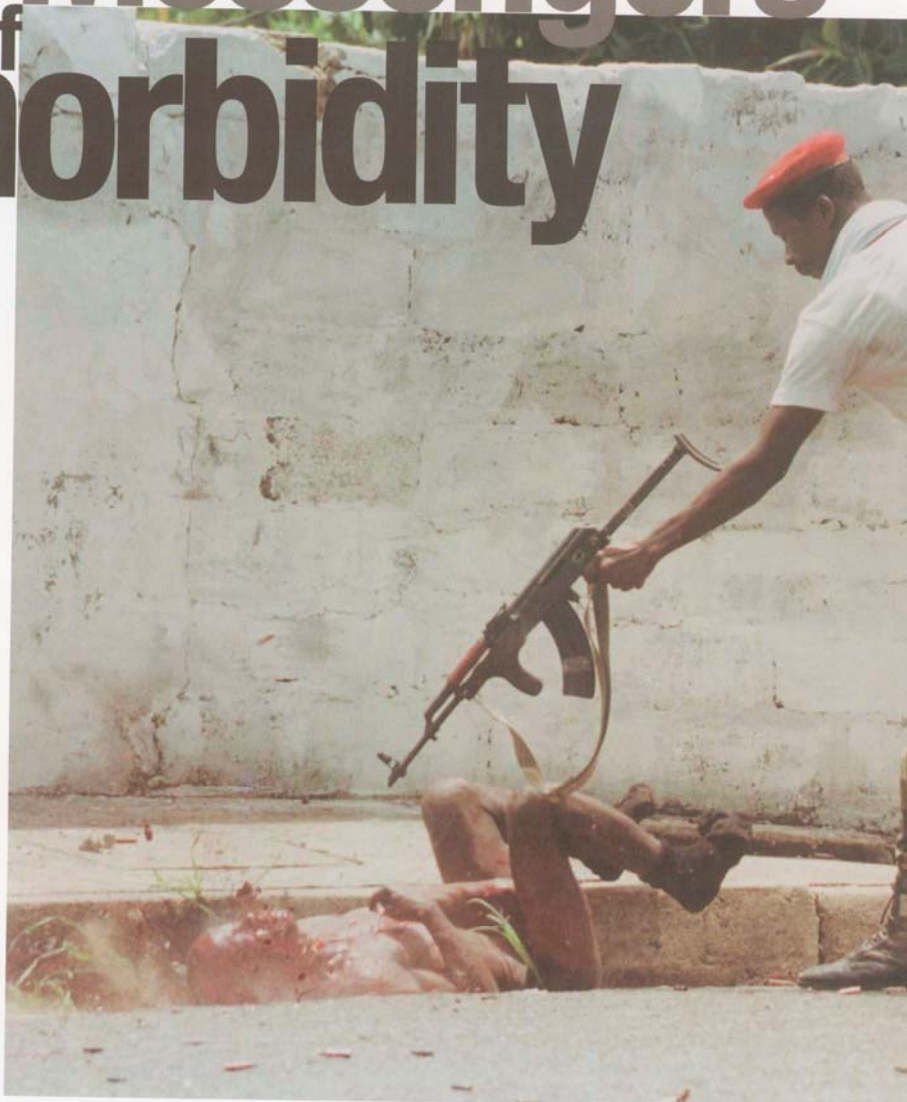
AFRICA, IF ONE BELIEVES THE MEDIA, IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST VIOLENT PLACES. BUT WHAT COMES OF THESE REPEATED NARRATIVES OF WAR AND OTHER VIOLENCE, FAMINE, COUPS AND DISASTERS? HOW CAN AFRICAN JOURNALISTS COVER THEIR OWN CONFLICTS MORE CONSTRUCTIVELY – WITHOUT BUYING TOTALLY INTO THE INTERNATIONAL NEWS VERSIONS OF WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THEIR OWN COUNTRIES, AT THE EXPENSE OF LOCAL COVERAGE? AND HOW CAN THEY MERELY SURVIVE THE PERSECUTION AND TRAUMA THAT COMES WITH THE TERRITORY?

## Expanding our repertoire in covering conflict

**Rob Manoff** unpacks 'objective' journalism  
and articulates a wide range of media roles  
– moving beyond reiterated narratives of violence...

# Messengers of morbidity

PHOTO: /REUTERS/AFRICA





**Execution, Liberia.**  
More than 30 wars  
have been waged in  
Africa since 1970.  
What has the media  
done to help?

**O**ur century has been characterised by organised group violence on an extraordinary scale. In roughly 250 significant armed conflicts, more than 110 million people have been killed, and many times that number wounded, crippled and mutilated.

Much of the violence has happened on African soil. According to a report issued by U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, more than 30 wars have occurred in Africa since 1970. In 1996 alone, 26 percent of the continent's nations were engaged in armed conflict, and these African wars accounted for more than half of all casualties worldwide.

We have become so used to these numbers and the human suffering they represent

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that it is easy to forget how much more violence we live with than did our ancestors, and how much more deadly it has become. Indeed, mass violence on a previously unimaginable scale has become universalised, industrialised and routinised. At this very moment, the escalation of the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea has caused the Horn of Africa to become the deadliest conflict cluster in the world. Yet we have become all too complacent about such facts, and all too often ignore such situations.

With this in mind, and for realpolitik, humanitarian and moral reasons, the international community has at last seriously begun to ask what more can be done to reduce and prevent such conflict and the suffering that attends it. The question is all

the more urgent in Africa, where widespread warfare has often prevented countries from converting their diversity into an asset for development.

For these reasons, it is critical that the international community begin to explore the potential of the media to prevent conflict. Taken together, the diverse mass media technologies, institutions, professionals, norms and practices constitute one of the most powerful forces now shaping the lives of individuals and the fate of peoples and nations. The media constitute a major human resource whose potential to help prevent and moderate social violence begs to be discussed, evaluated and, where appropriate, mobilised.

In asking what the media's preventive potential might be, much more than journalism must be on the table. In fact, in speaking about 'the media' I mean any and all mass media forms distributed to mass audiences by any technology whatsoever. The international community needs to understand and fully develop the potential of popular music; journalism; soap operas; advertising and public relations; T.V. and radio dramas and comedies; interactive video dialogues; talk shows and call-in shows; social marketing; wall posters; matchbooks; and the World Wide Web, among other mass media forms and formats. This focus on media content must be supplemented by the development of initiatives designed to explore the institutional dimension of the media by addressing professional codes and guidelines; government and multilateral policies; the interests of media personnel or the economic stakes of their employers; and the potential of training programmes and journalist and management exchanges.

Having said this, it must be admitted that in a number of countries no single issue has so bedeviled the discussion of media and conflict as the deeply held belief on the part of many journalists that the very idea of media-based preventive action violates the norm of 'objectivity' – whose corollary, disinterestedness with respect to the events being reported, is an essential element of the professional creed. There are more or less sophisticated variants of this creed, and 'nonpartisanship' or 'fairness' is sometimes substituted for 'objectivity' as the desirable norm. But whenever in recent years events such as the genocidal violence in Rwanda have provoked discussions concerning the role of the media, the conversation-stopper has been the passionate assertion by many journalists that such concerns lie beyond the pale of legitimate journalism.

Because this question so frequently becomes the fulcrum of debate for media and conflict issues in journalism settings, I would like to offer a small number of propositions that, I hope, may contribute to the clarification of such issues:

- It is important to stipulate that objectivity and related norms are fundamental core values in many journalism systems, and

that these norms are believed to be inviolable because they are essential to the profession's commitment to discovering and reporting the truth.

- Objectivity is, at the same time, an unobtainable ideal, as both philosophies of science and the post-modern emphasis on the genesis of narratives have made clear. A growing body of evidence points to the fact that there is an irreducible contingency in all accounts of the world (journalism's included) that belies the claim that they can, in fact, report 'the truth'.
- Objectivity is therefore in some sense both necessary and impossible. It is a 'vital illusion' – and perhaps even a tragic one. Objectivity is unobtainable, but the effort to achieve it is much of what gives the practice of journalism its social utility and sense of *noblesse oblige*.
- Yet 'objective' journalism may be faulted on the grounds that its epistemological strength as a truth-seeking technique is also the source of a fundamental moral weakness. For it is an article of faith for those who practice objectivity that they can neither intervene in events they are covering nor take responsibility for the consequences of their decision to abstain from doing so. Critics of this point of view make the case that the professional norms of journalism do not trump fundamental human moral obligations. To my knowledge, this argument has not been successfully refuted.
- Debates about media and conflict most often proceed without recognising that much of the world does not practice objectivity-based journalism, nor does it necessarily aspire to do so. While the rejection of objectivity in the name of 'The New World Information Order' or 'development journalism' has often in the past been a smokescreen for rationalising state control, it is nevertheless true that other forms of journalism possess excellent pedigrees and histories of accomplishment. Traditions of literary journalism, which emphasise a strong personal voice, or traditions of engagement, which express belief in the importance of defending the values and ambitions of communities (or even particular political parties or points of view), render the ideal of objectivity often irrelevant or undesirable to journalists operating within other cultures and media systems.
- Such journalists may have a point – or, again, they may not. We don't really know, inasmuch as the journalism profession as a whole has yet to carefully examine the nature of the epistemological foundations of its craft. To do so would be to ask whether objectivity-based journalism is an invention with universal validity, or whether it is a particularistic accomplishment which merely answers to the needs of particular societies or historical moments.
- Having raised this question, however, it must also be stipulated that no matter





how particularistic such journalism, in the end, might be determined to be, under no circumstances is propaganda a valid alternative to objective journalism, no matter how such propaganda may be rationalised.

- Objectivity-based journalism has proven to be an effective technique for seeking 'the truth' which human beings as a species so keenly need to understand. But objectivity may be only that: a particular technique, a time- and culture-bound solution to a species-wide compulsion.
- This should serve to remind us of the obvious point that journalism is a specific social practice that has a history, and that this history is one of unending social invention. Consider that only 100 years ago the interview – which today we

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would consider the primordial journalistic act – was regarded as an unacceptable invasion of privacy, a mindless waste of good reportorial energy (and, by Europeans, a particularly American outrage). What is more, such taken-for-granted journalistic staples as the sports page, science journalism, investigative reporting and business journalism are all recent journalistic inventions that answered to the needs of a particular moment. In other words, in discussing media and conflict issues, it is important not to fall prey to an ahistorical essentialism that presumes that today's form of journalism is, or ought to be, tomorrow's.

- Last, in the final analysis, objectivity – and, indeed, journalism itself – is only one of the media tools available to local actors and the international community for conflict resolution purposes. There is ample evidence that objective, fair, accurate and timely journalism is an effective way to help prevent or manage conflicts. But at the same time there is compelling evidence that there are a wide variety of media-based strategies that have nothing whatsoever to do with journalism that may be strikingly effective in their turn. We need to recognise that in intervening in a country in conflict, we need what advertising people call a 'good media mix' in which journalism is but one of the constituent ingredients.

In light of the foregoing stipulations, when it comes to examining the potential function of journalism, it seems to me that we need to operate analytically on both the operational and the paradigmatic levels. At the operational level, we need to consider what can be done right now to prevent and resolve conflict through activities consistent with existing journalistic practices in each region of the world.

But even as we consider what more might be done at the operational level, I believe that it is also incumbent upon us to work on the paradigmatic level, in order to develop entirely new ways for journalism to participate in the prevention and resolution of conflict. By doing so we free ourselves of the fetters imposed by journalists' conceptions of what it may be now possible to do

since, as already noted, journalism is a particular social practice whose principal tenets are both relatively recent and currently in flux. It does not seem unreasonable to imagine that the history of this profession will not be frozen in its present form. Indeed, the urgency of the task of preventing genocidal violence should shape the evolution of journalistic paradigms in ways that will make it possible for the profession to contribute to the prevention and resolution of conflict more effectively in the future.

I say this not as a representative of a humanitarian NGO, a multi-lateral assistance organisation or a victim of violence. I speak as a journalist, as someone who honours the profession's values and norms and who understands the way it serves its read-

ers and viewers every day in every corner of the globe. This is, in other words, a call from within the profession, and I am offering it in the knowledge that it will be considered unacceptable in many quarters, where the defense of journalism-as-it-is-practiced is motivated by an essentialist vision of the profession as somehow always remaining in the future what it has already become today. That view, I believe, is profoundly in error on both historical and moral grounds.

The **urgency** of preventing **genocidal violence** should shape the evolution of journalistic paradigms in ways that will make it possible for the profession to contribute to the **prevention** and **resolution** of conflict more effectively in the future.

Accordingly, we at the Center for War, Peace and the News Media have been asking ourselves if we could turn the usual question about media and conflict around. In lieu of asking, "What is possible for the media to do to prevent conflict?" we'd pose the question, "What does conflict resolution theory and practice tell us needs to be done to prevent conflict?" Instead of starting with the media's understanding of their own possibilities, as determined by current paradigms, we have decided to begin by establishing the desiderata for media action on the basis of the work of the negotiators, diplomats, Track Two practitioners and protagonists who have participated in the resolution of conflict, studied the process and/or developed a body of theory about it.

This shift of perspective makes it possible first and foremost to address the question of what conflict prevention and management require of the media. This is rather different from other discussions of media and conflict, which tend to accept at the outset what media professionals judge would be practical or possible according to the standards currently dominant in their fields.

When we began to examine conflict resolution theory and practice several years ago, we quickly identified a number of potential 'media roles' in conflict prevention that emerged from this literature and experience. Each one of these 'roles' has an

extensive theoretical and practical foundation in the conflict resolution tradition, and each, we felt, opened up possibilities for media activity that could readily be imagined. The point was to identify the conflict-preventing functions that the media can perform, and then to develop media-based activities (as appropriate to diverse conflict circumstances, media technologies and media systems) by means of which such functions can be fulfilled. With this schema in mind, we began to develop an inventory of such roles.

We discovered that the media were in some cases already performing some of these roles as a by-product of what they do for purely journalistic reasons. In such cases, the question then becomes whether the media can more self-consciously and

more completely take on the burden of preventing deadly conflict, whether within current paradigms or through the elaboration of new ones over the years to come.

In Africa we found that conflict resolution NGOs and, in some cases, international multi-lateral organisations had undertaken media initiatives that performed some of the roles. Among such projects have been the Video Dialogues projects coordinated by South Africa's Media Peace Centre in several townships; Radio Umwizero in

Burundi; Studio Ijambo, also in Burundi; Star Radio in Liberia; and perhaps a half-dozen other related initiatives. Meanwhile, as a small sample of the repertory of potential journalistic roles that I believe the media can and must play in the future, let me offer the following:

#### POTENTIAL MEDIA ROLES IN CONFLICT PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT

- **Channelling communication between parties:** The media not infrequently play this role ad hoc in domestic and international politics as it is; the point would be to heighten the appreciation and systematic performance of this dialogical role in the ethnopolitical context.
- **Educating:** Simply changing the information environment in which the parties operate can have a marked impact on the dynamics of conflict; it is particularly useful to promote appreciation of the complex factors impinging on the conflict situation, and to create appreciation of and tolerance for the negotiation process itself.
- **Confidence building:** Lack of trust between parties is a major factor contributing to conflict. The media can help to reduce suspicion through their reporting of contested issues, and increase trust through reporting of stories that suggest or illustrate that accommodation is possible.

- **Counteracting misperceptions:** Related to the confidence-building role above, journalists can come to see the misconceptions of the parties as a story in and of itself, and by reporting this story can encourage the parties to revise such views, moving closer to the prevention or resolution of a conflict in the process.

- **Analysing conflict:** This differs from conventional conflict reporting in that the media would self-consciously apply analytical frameworks derived from conflict resolution and related fields to systematically enhance the public's understanding of key aspects of the situation, as well as the dynamics of the efforts to manage it.

- **Deobjectifying the protagonists for each other:** Sophisticated journalism, by revealing peoples' complexity, can already do this, but the question is whether some of what journalists already do ad hoc can be developed into a systematic repertory which they will be able to employ by virtue of an enhanced conception of journalism influenced by conflict-prevention considerations.

- **Identifying the interests underlying the issues:** This is standard conflict resolution practice, but it is surprising how infrequently journalists address this question in stories. As one media scholar has remarked, in the case of U.S. journalism, instead of answering "Why?" with a sophisticated analysis of underlying group interests, "Explanation in American journalism is a kind of long-distance mind reading in which the journalist elucidates the motives, intentions,

purposes, and hidden agendas which guide individuals in their actions."<sup>1</sup>

- **Providing emotional outlets:** Conflicts may escalate or explode in part because the parties have no adequate outlets for expression of their grievances. Conflict can be fought out in the media rather than in the streets. Already prone to report conflict, journalists could better serve their readers and viewers, as well as the cause of preventive diplomacy, by more fully understanding this role and perhaps pursuing it self-consciously.

- **Encouraging a balance of power:** This helps get parties to the negotiating table. A media report can weaken a stronger party or strengthen a weaker party in the eyes of public, thereby encouraging parties to negotiate when they otherwise might not have out of concern for the perception of their relative positions.

- **Framing and defining the conflict:** This is nothing but good journalism practiced on the right occasions. The media can help frame the issues and interests in such a way that they become more susceptible to management. The media can be particularly attentive to the concessions made by the parties, the common ground that exists between them, the solutions they have considered, and so on.

- **Face saving and consensus building:** Similarly, when, in the course of negotia-

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## Messengers

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tions, parties take steps toward resolving a conflict, they risk being attacked by more intransigent members of their own constituencies. The media can greatly facilitate the process of compromise by making it possible for negotiators to address their own publics through the media in order to explain their negotiating positions and build support for them.

- **Solution building:** Conflicts get prevented or managed when the parties table and consider possible solutions to grievances. Journalists can play a role in this process by pressing the parties for their proffered solutions. Although this seems self-evident, many third-party negotiators have noted that parties are often so invested in their grievances that they do not develop or consider options for potential agreement with adversaries. The simple act of eliciting ideas and reporting them could assist the dynamic of the more formal mediation process itself. It should also be noted that the process of formal mediation can fail if there is not a parallel process of what might be called 'social mediation', by which the constituents and publics of the formal negotiating parties are brought into the process and prepared to accept its outcome.

This is but a partial account of potential media roles. A fuller account would describe a complex set of activities undertaken by a great variety of actors operating from institutional bases in independent, multi-lateral and governmental institutions

in conflict situations of great diversity. Elaborating such a full account will require, over time, the combined efforts of media professionals, diplomats, conflict resolvers and diverse protagonists, among others.

The process by which this could be done would be one of 'social invention' in which the spontaneous, largely uncoordinated but not random activities of diverse actors could create new institutions and behaviours. Journalism itself, in fact, is a product of precisely this process over time, as is the sitcom, soap opera, rap song, portable radio and the sports page. It would be folly to believe that the history of the media has ended here, and that we do not possess the social imagination to meet the challenge now being posed by the threat of mass social violence to human societies everywhere.

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1 James W. Carey, "The Dark Continent of American Journalism," in Robert Karl Manoff and Michael Schudson, eds., *Reading the News*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1987.

## Tide

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taking place globally. But it has also meant, at times, redefining the commonly held definitions of news to include new perspectives, other and more voices and a different position to the dominant view.

Translating this vision into practice within the IPS Africa network means that reporting on the issues of health, education, poverty, women's human rights, labour, transport, the environment and other issues of development is still the essence of the IPS reporting from Africa. Getting journalists to accept these issues as part of their daily news agendas has been the result of training programmes, seminars on new themes and constant on-line, daily guidance by the IPS editors. To IPS journalists in Africa, a story about the Congolese rebels suspending hostilities in their territories to allow children to be immunised is as important as the story about seven heads of state involved in the Democratic Republic of Congo conflict signing a cease-fire accord.

We live in an era where international bodies like the World Trade Organisation (WTO) determine the winners and losers in the movement of goods and services, and most often the 'winner's' story gets told. But the other side of the story must be told, too: like the recent IPS story filed from Kenya on the fight to stop a Parliamentary bill which would strip farmers and local innovators of their right to technologies and indigenous knowledge. Or the underside of the story, reported in the mainstream press, that Mozambique's multi-billion dollar debt relief package could be a big boost to the nation –

IPS went deeper to reveal that the deal would prevent the country from rescuing its cashew nut-processing industry. This would mean that 10,000 Mozambicans, half of them women, would remain without work.

Along with stories on African politics and economics, IPS' Africa coverage has included, among many others, stories on girl soldiers in Sierra Leone laying down their guns for books; the housing crisis in the oil-rich country of Gabon, where the disabled are particularly vulnerable to homelessness; prison conditions in Kenya; children's rights and new laws in Nigeria; a rice production scheme that has been successful in providing a livelihood to the unemployed in Congo; increasing poverty in oil-rich Equatorial Guinea. These stories focus on human development, and people's right to development.

During the last two years, IPS Africa also has worked on re-training its network of journalists to advance reporting on women's rights as a human rights issue. Through the development of an editorial policy and through subsequent training programmes, IPS journalists have actively begun to seek out women as valuable sources of news and information.

IPS is constantly refining its role within the world's information order. Remaining a 'classic' among the 'trend-setters' means that the agency must meet the challenge of filling the gaps in reporting events and processes with a different focus, yet one that engages media managers and audiences. It must also continue to meet the challenge of keeping Africa, with all of its complexities and changes, on the international media's agenda.

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## West

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Meanwhile, Kinshasa's own demands to Kabila were depicted as stubbornness and indecisiveness. Indeed, the reports on Kabila's demands conveniently omitted the U.N.'s demand for a ceasefire as a preamble to negotiations. However, the reports did point to frustrations by U.N. emissaries in their negotiations with Mobutu and other government leaders.

As military engagements intensified, the imbalance in coverage of the two sides widened. The agencies' reports chronicled the rapid advance by rebel alliance forces – 1,500 kilometres in barely three months – and openly suggested that government forces were no match. For example, in mid-February 1997, the AP depicted use of aerial bombardment by government forces as ineffective against the rebels' ground plans to take several key cities, including Kisangani, the country's third largest. The air strikes were reported as "last options in Mobutu's fight against rebels" that couldn't "change the tide in war". The articles also depicted aerial bombings as a threat to peaceful resolution because they could prompt Kabila to "withdraw his offer to negotiate". Indeed, the AP once claimed (without substantiation) that journalists and relief workers saw "Mi-24 combat gunships and warplanes apparently piloted by mercenaries from Eastern Europe".

But the reports went beyond allusions. AP regularly reported the rebel take-over of towns and settlements as "orderly and peaceful". Government forces were described as a "struggling army counter-offensive against the rebels". Government forces were portrayed as "troops on looting sprees in nearly every town they have abandoned to the rebels". Where they didn't altogether abandon a town, the government forces offered "little resistance". The agency wrote on March 8th: "In each town, demoralised and unpaid Zairean troops learn of the rebel approach, loot everything in sight and then retreat, leaving the town to the rebels without a fight." And a day later: "[Kabila] presides over a sophisticated military and political organisation. And his rebels have three advantages over Mobutu's unpaid and demoralised government troops: strategy, discipline and motivation."

AP later wrote: "[The rebel alliance] favours pincer movements on the battlefield, always leaving the enemy an escape route to herd it west. Government forces have pillaged towns they were supposed to be defending and fled without much of a fight. Unlike the army, the rebels are disciplined. On a continent where many armies are fuelled by beer, rebels are not drunk in public. Their U.S.-style uniforms are crisp in sweltering jungles. They follow command."

The manner in which the agencies consumed war propaganda from both the rebel and government forces is disconcerting. For example, the rebel forces were reported

being within 14 miles of Kisangani on March 4, 1997, but within 50 to 60 miles of the city a week later. Had there been a retreat or a misrepresentation of fact? And when Kisangani eventually fell on March 14, both wire agencies reported heavy fighting and mortar-fire, yet the AP talked of "little resistance from the government forces" a few days later.

The characterisations of Mobutu and Kabila were pointed. During October and November 1996 – the period when G-7 countries were contemplating an 'intervention force' – Mobutu was portrayed as a stubborn African leader who was nonetheless open to dialogue. Yet in the months leading to his ousting, the wire agencies simply switched adjectives. They described him as a "dictator", "systematic plunderer", "looter" and "thief". Describing his re-emergence after a month-long "seclusion", AP reported that "even his cap seemed to be getting tattered." Kabila, on the other hand, was depicted as a pragmatic leader and his past – allegedly as a gold and diamond smuggler – was left largely unquestioned. News reports described him as a modern leader with a corporate look, a sharp contrast to the old-fashioned and impervious Mobutu. Some wire reports even alluded to Kabila's energy and sense of humour.

But probably the most insidious bias in this reportage was the negligence towards the human costs of war. Reports filed throughout the entire period were silent about civilian casualties, dilapidation of

public amenities, threat of epidemics, destruction of economic activity and the general mayhem that are war's direct results. Indeed, the coverage was so overtly reductionist that it at times appeared to mobilise support for war or at least make the civil war acceptable. On numerous occasions, the agencies used language and imagery that portrayed war as inevitable and morally justifiable.

Little wonder that the wire agencies, despite their close proximity to the civil war's frontline, could not corroborate relief agencies' claims that hundreds of thousands of refugees had been slaughtered in the rebel onslaught. Considering that a large number of stories carried 'battlefront' datelines, it is difficult to understand how the now widely feared – but all so real – genocide of fleeing Rwandan Hutus could have gone unnoticed. Even more confounding was the glaring failure by agency correspondents to take the rebels to task on the refugees' fate as the civil war raged.

The truth about these serious omissions lies in the storyline that the correspondents subscribed to in their reportage. Clearly, the line followed during the rebels' march on Kinshasa conformed to the foreign policy of Western governments. Whether other storylines will ever emerge is anyone's guess.

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