

## How coverage of the Zairean civil war toed the policy lines of Western governments

**W**ar reporting is arguably one of journalism's most challenging genres. As pointed out by such veteran war journalists as John Pilger and Martha Gellhorn, contradictions between the journalistic practice of forthright reporting and the demands of national security make it difficult to decide which truth to seek out and tell.

The scenario becomes exceedingly complex if journalists are reporting on a war involving their own country: questions of nationalism and patriotism arise against the professional commitment to balanced reporting. Undoubtedly, patriotic reporting inhibits balanced reporting and may also induce silence, a clear manifestation of self-censorship.

All too often the media remain mute about, or minimise, the human costs of war. Even worse, the sacrifice of human rights during war or other armed conflict is often legitimised by the media, which in many cases serve as a mouthpiece or amplifier of government policy. The media, in some cases, legitimise the war itself.

Repeatedly the media glorify war, trivialise human suffering and produce heroes in situations where there are no winners. They latch onto simplistic, often static, conflict narratives which do not reflect war's complexities or mutations. They represent a war – usually on foreign soil, and often on Africa's – through a grid familiar at home, but alien and inappropriate to the conflict at hand. The coverage by two prominent international wire services of the former Zaire's civil war is a case in point.

Before looking at that coverage, let me offer some of the complexities of that conflict.

The storyline discernible in the early reporting of the crisis in Goma was the threat of continuing genocide. As the Rwandan genocide of 1994 was brought to an end by a Tutsi-led rebel army operating from Uganda, government forces and millions of Hutu civilians fled into eastern Zaire to escape retribution by the new regime. Once inside Zaire, the ousted Rwandese government forces regrouped and began launching cross-border incursions into Rwanda. They also conducted pogroms against the indigenous Zairean Tutsi – cousins of the Rwandan Tutsis who have lived in south-eastern Zaire for several centuries – using money and supplies siphoned off from the U.N.-sponsored refugee programme.

The attacks by Hutu *genocidaires* in early and mid-1996 were overtly aided by Mobutu Sese Seko's government, and the small Zairean Tutsi population – the Banyamulenge – found itself fighting for survival for a second time. The first offensive, launched by Mobutu's rubber-stamp Parliament, had stripped the Banyamulenge of Zairean citizenship and ordered them to leave the country, presumably for Rwanda or Burundi. The large-scale massacres by the *genocidaires* came soon after.

The Banyamulenge formed an alliance with pockets of rebels that had waged small on-off battles against the government troops for decades. A previously unknown Laurent Kabila led the new Alliance of Democratic Forces. The alliance's main objective was to protect the Banyamulenge from Mobutu's armies, resolve the refugee crisis, close the refugee camps to quash incursions by Hutu *genocidaires* and create a 'buffer state' along the eastern border.

Fast-forward for a different storyline: a power shift in Zaire's leadership and a reconfiguration of Western support. The alliance's popularity grew exponentially in late 1996 after the Tutsi-led Rwandan government began openly arming it. The alliance's objectives also broadened – to ousting Mobutu – after Zairean government forces failed to put up a fight. Suddenly, what had started as a low-key defence initiative by an insignificant minority metamorphosed into an ambitious offensive for national power. Within nine months, the rebel alliance was set to take Kinshasa after capturing large sections of the country. With

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# West

In war and other conflict situations, journalists often shape their reportage to conform with the foreign



policies of their home countries, argues **Nixon Kariithi**. He uses wire service coverage of the war in the former Zaire to make his point...



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Shifts in Western loyalties were reflected in media coverage. Mobutu Sese Seko (left), once depicted as a stubborn but approachable leader, became a "systematic plunderer" as Laurent Kabila (right) gained the upper hand. Kabila himself, once slated as "a rebel" by the media, started being praised for his pragmatism.



Refugees fleeing the former Zaire, November 1996: agency correspondents generally failed to take the rebels to task on the refugees' fate as the civil war raged.

PHOTO: PETER ANDREWS/REUTERS

little chance for success, Mobutu fled the country and Kabila declared himself President on May 12, 1997. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was born.

Two of the world's largest wire agencies, Associated Press (AP) and Agence France Presse (AFP), filed more than 5,000 articles on the civil war between September 1996 when the Kabila alliance emerged and Mobutu's downfall in May 1997. There is little doubt that covering the Zairean conflict was one of their biggest assignments in Africa during that period: each agency deployed at least two dozen journalists, with some journalists reporting daily for up to three weeks. Between October and December 1996, the stories had far-flung international datelines as the world,

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ashamed by its failure to stop the Rwandan genocide, braced itself for another shocker from the African Great Lakes region.

In these three months alone, nearly 2,500 stories were moved by the two agencies, capturing debate in Europe and the United States about how to get involved without getting involved. Indeed, two-thirds of the articles filed in November were about the abortive U.N. intervention force that the West whipped out.

But when the idea of a Western-backed peacekeeping operation vaporised faster than it had appeared, the intense media spotlight on Zaire faded. The number of articles on the conflict moved by AP and AFP dropped sevenfold, and the datelines also constricted; stories filed over the ensuing five months were predominantly from the battlefield in eastern Zaire, or the capital city of Kinshasa from where the beleaguered Mobutu government mounted feeble propaganda initiatives. A third common dateline was the French chateau hillsides where reporters kept vigil on Mobutu's deteriorating health. Datelines from Western capitals re-emerged as Kabila closed in on Kinshasa and increased marginally after the U.N. began investigating the fate of thousands of Hutu civilian refugees.

In November 1996, coverage shifted emphasis to the seeming inevitability of a Western-led intervention initiative to pre-

empt an imminent genocide or a disintegration of the state in the Great Lakes region. The reluctance of the G-7 countries to commit their troops or resources – for fear of a repeat of the embarrassing Somalia debacle in 1993 – was equated to the non-committal stance of African countries neighbouring the troubled region.

Eventually in early December, the amniotic coverage settled down to the engagements between Kabila's rebel alliance and government forces. In a flash, the annihilation threat for hundreds of thousands of refugees – so real only a few weeks earlier – vanished. Stories from Goma and the outlying rural settlements, now consumed by serious combat, suggested that the UN-led intervention force was unnecessary since the refugees were voluntarily returning home. With the refugees out of sight, AP and AFP coverage focused on the rebel alliances and their ambition of ending Mobutu's three-decade rule.

Between December 1996 and February 1997, coverage highlighted the dire implications imminent in the failure of peace initiatives from the U.N. Security Council and several African countries led by South Africa. Kabila's terms for a cease-fire and his often unreasonable ultimatums were spelt out but hardly ever interrogated.

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On weekends do sportsmen not think of sport?  
Do musicians not think of music?  
Do gardeners not think of gardening?  
And artists not think of art?  
So what then, do businesspeople think of  
on weekends?



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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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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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