

Behind the scenes:



Somalia and Rwanda

There is no war, then, without representation, no sophisticated weaponry without psychological mystification. ... Weapons are tools not just of destruction but also of perception.

**~ Paul Virilio, Philosopher
1932 -**

From 1992-1995, two countries in Africa faced one of the hardest periods of their existence. The internal conflict was of biblical proportions in terms of casualties, disease, famine, and political chaos impacting stability in the region and dramatically changing the course of economic, political and social events up to the present day.

For both the Somalia and Rwandan crises, there are *common actors* that play particular roles. These include civil society, rebels, the local government, the international community (represented by the decision makers of the UN Security Council and International Nongovernmental Organizations or INGOs) for peacekeeping operations, military support and finally, the media. Keeping in mind that each of the actors are key players in understanding Somalia and Rwanda, it would be almost mandatory to analyze each of their roles individually. However, I have decided to concentrate on just one that to me played a very influential role. Most of the time this player has gone unnoticed—it is ***The Media.***

But what is media? What role did media play in the Somalia and Rwandan crises of the early 1990s? Was media used mainly as an instrument to carry out a message? Was it used as a tool from one side in the conflict, for example within factions in Somalia, to manipulate opinion to extend *personal* interests? How influential was the media, not only

domestically but internationally, on the decision makers? How can we relate the role of the media in Somalia with what later happened in Rwanda? Can we even think about it?

It is evident that many questions arise around the role of media in humanitarian crises anywhere they occur, and there are many potential explanations for each of these questions. That is why, in an attempt to answer most of the questions in this paper, I argue that events in Somalia and the way the media portrayed the crisis resulted in a reluctance by political decision makers to maintain peacekeeping operations in Rwanda when the devastating crisis erupted in that beleaguered country.

To support this argument, I will first provide a brief context for the crises in Somalia and Rwanda. Second, I will identify the role that media played during the Somalia and Rwanda crises. Third, I will analyze the impact the media had on international perceptions of peacekeeping operations in the region, leading to a reaction to the Rwanda crisis that was far too little too late. Finally, I will conclude by recapitulating key issues about the role that media played in Somalia and Rwanda and provide some final thoughts.

Context

Before proceeding, ***the media*** will be understood as a ***Mechanism to store and deliver information or data; a tool used to communicate and spread a particular message using images, voice, or both.***

(American Psychological Association)

Somalia

Inter-clan violence led to massacres, ethnic cleansing, and a massive exodus of displaced persons in all directions.... The area between Mogadishu and the Kenyan border became a 'shatter zone' within which residents were exposed to repeated rounds of looting until they began to starve. Mogadishu itself became the epicenter of very destructive shelling and warfare.

(Menkhaus 2003: 3)

The massive famine which occurred from late 1991 through 1992, and which ultimately claimed an estimated 240,000 Somali lives, was thus almost entirely due to armed conflict and wartime plundering.

(Refugee Policy Group 1994:5)

Scholars such as Menkhaus (2003), Girardet, Bartoli and Carmel (1995) and Jeffrey (1993), along with research reports from the UNDPK (United Disabled Persons of Kenya) and the UNHCR (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees) have dedicated part of their work to analyze the factors that led to the crisis in Somalia. Their articles and reports surmise that the situation in Somalia was caused by a multiplicity of factors from underdevelopment, clannism, and corruption, to the end of the cold war and a loss of strategic importance, all leading to further human rights violations that resulted in aid sanctions and isolation.

As a direct consequence in 1992, Somalia was in the middle of both famine and civil war, and the country was largely embroiled in chaos and domination by warlords. Relief supplies were frequently stolen by armed gangs, who would hold the goods hostage for the loyalty of the population. As a result, the United Nations requested armed peacekeepers to assist the relief operations. (Alex 2007)

As noted, to assist with the dire situation in Somalia, peacekeeping and military missions were sent. The first mission was UNOSOM I (United Nations Operations in Somalia I) with a main responsibility to maintain the fragile peace agreement and consequent cease-fire. The second mission was UNITAF (Unified Task Force which was a United States-led, United Nations-sanctioned multinational force which operated in Somalia and was a US-led military humanitarian operation strictly deployed to guarantee humanitarian assistance such as food and other survival resources). The last mission was UNOSOM II (United Nations Operations in Somalia II), whose goal was to restore the peace and stability after the mayhem of violent confrontations that had resulted in the huge military and civilian casualties of 1993-1994. UNOSOM II stayed in Somalia until 1996.

Nonetheless, the peacekeeping operations did not go as planned. There were incidents where Somali civilians were not only starving, but also being used as human shields by the warlords who were storing illegal weapons and breaking the cease-fire agreements. The warlords sought to protect themselves from the UNOSOM I Pakistani peacekeepers as well as from the repercussions of the *Mogadishu Battle* and *Black Hawk Down* incidents in which American rangers of the UNITAF mission were targeted and killed. These events indicated failure for the peacekeeping operations, and in a direct way, influenced the decision makers from powerful nations like the USA to think very carefully about repeating

their efforts in Somalia when other humanitarian crises emerged later in the region as a whole.

Rwanda

Between April and June 1994, an estimated 800,000 Rwandans were killed in the space of 100 days. Most of the dead were Tutsis, and most of those who perpetrated the violence were Hutus. (BBC News 2008)

The situation in Rwanda had certain similarities to the one in Somalia. It, too, was a small country in Africa that did not represent major interests for any of the powerful nations in the West. Rwanda was also an underdeveloped country with literally no government (the president was killed when his plane was shot down). Somalia and Rwanda shared the challenges of rampant government corruption, social inequality as well as overt and covert violations of human rights.

Still, contrary to the Somalia crisis, the Rwandan crisis was considered by some academics and journalists to be a purely *tribal* conflict—a *tribal hatred* that led to genocide and that until today, many scholars are still trying to understand. Despite the fact that the perpetrators of the genocide did not possess conventional weapons, they were armed and motivated by *hatred*. It was this emotion, along with a deep-rooted sense of inequality, which ultimately resulted in genocide and the killing of 800,000 souls (Tutsis and moderate Hutus). Thousands more were displaced, many becoming refugees, and all coping with rampant diseases as they tried to live on a depressing political, economic and social stage. **(Dallaire 2004)**

Yet the genocide—which is the *globally* known event—is only one part of the actual crisis in Rwanda. In 1993, only a year before the genocide, the situation in Rwanda was different. The Arusha Peace Agreement was signed by the Rwandese parties on 4 August 1993 and as part of the cease-fire and peace agreement, the United Nations had sent a peacekeeping mission, United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), which had the responsibility to support and help “...implement the Arusha Peace agreement.” **(UN.org)**

From 1993 to 1994, there were certain signs that the peace agreement was weak and an environment of mistrust and potential conflict was always latent.

The Media and its role in Somalia and Rwanda

The CNN effect described the capacity of images of human suffering, delivered in real time, to mobilize outrage worldwide, forcing national governments and international agencies to ameliorate humanitarian crises or take up arms on behalf of beleaguered underdogs in *'other people's wars*.
(Carruthers 2011: 142)

In the 1990s, international media coverage and the dissemination of local images showing starving children, hopeless civilians and teenagers carrying weapons became viral. The intention was to eliminate the geographical gap and bring the reality of the *invisible people* who were suffering thousands of kilometers away closer into the comfort of the average American household. The purpose was to motivate the Western audience to get involved in helping change the lives of helpless civilians in the targeted country.

This media phenomenon was later named the ***CNN effect***, which, through television and photographic images, made American people aware of the humanitarian crises in countries like Somalia. There was an overwhelming need for the *hero* to bring food, peace and stability to a distant and unnoticed country.

Inside Somalia

It all started when

“...the first journalist sought out the most sensationalist stories of suffering, asking aid workers where they might find some ‘stick action’ meaning the emaciated infants who could be filmed at the point of death.”

(Caruthers 2000: 240, Lyman 1995: 122-3)

This had the single intention of capturing the best image of the humanitarian horror occurring and disseminating it to not only create awareness of the situation, but also fundraise for financial or *'in kind'* donations providing immediate care and aid to the victims of the crisis. **(Hammond 2007)**

The strategic ***CNN effect*** worked perfectly and inspired the American people to pressure their government for action, forcing the decision makers in the US to help. It was so powerful that a UN humanitarian mission led by American military was launched and it was to be known as ***Operation Restore Hope***.

Former US diplomat George Kennan concluded that the decision to launch *Operation Restore Hope* must have been driven by **media coverage** of suffering and the consequent public pressure for action. Policy has been **“...controlled by popular emotional impulses provoked by the commercial television industry.”**
(The Guardian, 7 October 1993)

Second, after the UNITAF mission was deployed, a series of unfortunate events happened that led to the famous *Mogadishu Battle* and the *Black Hawk Down* incident. This time, the role of media was shifted, and by showing real-time images of American rangers being dragged through the streets by their assailants, produced public outrage urging powerful decision makers (government and the president) to undermine support for the mission.
(Carruthers 2011: 143)

It was quite evident that the scenario had changed 360 degrees because the American rangers, who were on a mission to bring humanitarian assistance, were now victims themselves. The people whom they were trying to protect became the victimizers. With the **CNN effect** and other international media registering everything that was happening, it made the American people react demanding urgent action and justice.

“In the words of one US congressman, pictures of starving children, not policy objectives, got us into Somalia in 1992. Pictures of US casualties, not the completion of our objectives, led us to exit Somalia.”

(Minnear, Scott and Weiss, 1996: 46, cited in Carruthers 2011: 143)

Furthermore, the balance of this incident cost more than the lives of the 18 US Rangers and thousands of Somali militants and civilians, but it also created an alert for the United States government to withdraw its men from the region and reconsider the cost-benefits of providing aid to any other country in Africa.

On top of that, even after US soldiers were killed and the UNITAF mission was withdrawn, descriptive images about the Somalia chaos, children still starving and warlords with control, continued to appear on television, in newspapers and media outlets carrying news of interest to the American population, making them *very much* aware *everyday* of the situation. Consequently, a mix of emotions and reactions developed, from empathy to rage and overall fatigue, also known as *Somalia Fatigue*...It is not simply that an image exists, but that these images can become something else—they can become weapons, symbols of cooperation, markers of territory and so on. **(Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2010: 21)**

In 1994, parallel to the situation in Somalia, 1979.73 km (1230 miles) away in Rwanda, another humanitarian crisis with clear threats of a civil war and genocide was blooming. Before the genocide started, statements from Romeo Dallaire, Commander of the UNAMIR mission, as well as reports from the United Nations peacekeeping missions in Rwanda, show that the cease-fire was thought to be weak and that groups were unhappy. News and articles from other actors on the ground, such as staff from the Red Cross and Human Rights Watch, supported the growing unease. Local media, notably the Radio Télévision Libre des Milles Collines (RTL), Rwanda's first private radio station, was broadcasting messages of hatred and inequality amongst the people to the point of *fanning the flames* of hate and genocide in Rwanda. **(Thompson 2007:308)**

It was almost predicted that a massive confrontation and further genocide was going to take place. In spite of the alerts and requests from the UNAMIR commander, the genocide could not be stopped. Peacekeepers from Belgium got killed and as a result the peacekeeping mission was withdrawn. The Rwandan people were abandoned by the international community, including the United Nations Security Council, and for a period of 100 days were left to their own fate.

How did this happen? Why was the media not as effective creating awareness and pressure from the international community, in particular the American audience, as it had been initially in Somalia? The UN Security Council and the US government were not responding to the Rwandan crisis as they did in Somalia—why? The answer is not quite clear, but the reasons might be as follows:

First, ***“The international media only reached a critical mass in recording the signs of the aftermath of the genocide, notably by bloated corpses, strewn at the roadside or choking Rwanda’s rivers.”***

(Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2010:103)

Also, there was little to nonexistent coverage giving information about the situation while it was happening due to the South African elections, where the few African journalists and some international journalists went to report. In South Africa, **Nelson Mandela** was the *big news*.

“There were several references to genocide in Rwanda and Burundi in the media but these referred to past massacres. This, just a week after the killings had begun, was the first hint that what was happening was not

mayhem but a well-organized genocide. The name of the organized death squads, the Interahamwe, was not mentioned in the press until 30 of April when Reuters started to use it. And only gradually throughout April did the language of newspapers change from describing a civil war to declaring it was genocide.”
(Dowden 2004: 55)

Likewise, there was a failure to act, protect and prevent casualties. The fear and cost of becoming active in the genocide increased the reluctance of Western powers to intervene during the climax of the crisis.

Second, aside from the failure of the UNITAF mission in Somalia, the numbing *Somalia fatigue*, caused by the constant bombardment of images and news from the international media, found Western audiences slow to react to any humanitarian disaster that was not massively publicized like Somalia, let alone for one in a country that represented no national or personal interests.

Third, “The US, whose airlift and financial muscle are essential to any rapid UN peacekeeping operation, had been traumatized by the death of 18 of its special forces in Somalia on a single night the previous October.”
(Dowden 2004: 54)

Last, as far as “...Washington was concerned, Rwanda was Africa and Africa was Somalia; President Clinton was not going to allow the UN—let alone the US—to get sucked into local conflicts that might end in another disaster.”
(Dowden 2004: 54)

Finally, the eyes of the world were not centered in Rwanda while the genocide was happening, but only when the situation was “under control” and the blood had already been shed.

Conclusion

After analyzing the above, we can see that the crises in Somalia and Rwanda shared a lot of behind the scene elements in common; both were humanitarian crises in Africa with failed cease-fire and peace agreements, that despite having support of UN peacekeepers, civilian casualties and human rights violations could not be stopped.

They also shared the fact that media played an influential role both domestically and internationally. On one hand, the media helped to create international awareness of the events with the intention of triggering reactions pressuring key decision makers to respond. On the other hand, the media was used as a weapon by one side of the conflict to

perpetuate fear, hatred and even guide their affiliates towards committing more killings (particularly in the case of Rwanda and the radio station).

What is more, the media also influenced the way in which policymakers in the US consider the cost (UN peacekeepers, American soldier casualties) with the benefits and interests that a deployed mission would serve.

All in all, the case of Somalia shows how the media can serve the purpose of inspiring powerful decision makers to get involved in a crisis, but it can also shift public opinion and thus support away from humanitarian crises with unexpected incidents like the *Mogadishu Battle* and *Black Hawk Down*. In Somalia, the media influenced the *same* decision makers to rethink their roles and the impact that their presence was having, resulting in a reluctance on their part to react sooner to the petition of the UNAMIR commander to support stopping the genocide in Rwanda.

To sum up, the media was so influential during the Somalia humanitarian crisis using powerful images and stories of the beleaguered population that policymakers and the UN Secretariat bowed to pressure from Western audiences watching the crisis unfold on the nightly news. But the media also played a significant role in shifting popular support away from the humanitarian efforts after highly publicized stories and images of international peacekeepers and US soldiers becoming victims of those they were there to help. When Rwanda needed the UN and the World to come to its rescue as genocide was carried out in that country, the policymakers chose to be “prudent” about any efforts to intervene.

“It was an article of faith among the members of the Secretariat that, were the UN to suffer another disaster like Somalia with more peacekeepers being killed, the organization will suffer a possibly fatal blow to its credibility.”

(Barnett 1997:562)

As a final thought, it is interesting to consider that, regardless of the humanitarian crises,

“How we respond to news of war, the idea of militarization and the peacekeeping missions in Africa, depends on our evaluations of the truthfulness of what media deliver us.”

(Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2010: 85)

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