

The Commodification of Genocide: Part I. Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) Control of the International Media

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Abstract

We did a qualitative content analysis of news reports disseminated by international media about events occurring in Rwanda. We grouped these reports into seven themes: human rights, security, foreign relations, Hutu menace in the Great Lakes, memorializing the victims, economic situation, and democracy, of which we report only the first three here. We argue that news coverage has been de-capitated by the ruling elite and that the Western capitalist states have supported this co-optation. To gain access, Western journalists have had to cooperate with the state rather than with critical Rwandan journalists or even NGOs. Our paper thus exposes alternatives to the dominant view in each thematic area.

Keywords: genocide, ideology, commodification of genocide, ruling elite, Western capitalist states

1. Introduction

Foreign correspondents who are based in Third World countries do not operate in a free environment. Often they are not familiar with the language and the culture in which they are operating (Hachten, 1992, pp. 34-38). They have to rely upon government officials for their accounts and interpretations of events. In order to retain their visas, they must stay on good terms with the government. Hence they are vulnerable to manipulation by their sources. Using news coverage of Rwanda by international media we wanted to find out how such news-gathering constraints affect international media. We first present our theoretical framework.

These days almost everything has been commodified: e.g., health care, culture, and human geography. Commodification refers to anything that is being sold for profit. Take for example “oriental rugs” or “St. Patrick’s Day.” These can be packaged and sold, as can be every imaginable cuisine. More troubling, slavery was a form of commodification of labor. News media conglomerates look for news stories that would attract a large audience; that audience is then sold to advertisers. In other words, the audience is being made into a product. It is commodified.

The terms of Marx can be applied: news has “exchange value” that is higher when the item is a unique brand and lower when it is commodified and indistinguishable from other brands. Between the capitalist elite and the working class, according to Figure A, lies “ideology.” An ideology such as democracy, when provided by a ruling class, can provide a false consciousness and “commodity fetishism.” What about when products like health are commodified such that we are deceived about their value, e.g., illegal pharmaceuticals? What if products like peace and security are undermined by false flag operations that lead to heightened conflict? We begin by describing a cultural event – a conflict flaring up in the 1990s and continuing thereafter until today – and then we explain how it has been commodified.

2. Theory

We can portray Marxism crudely as a capitalist elite imposing its ideology from the top down upon a working class. But Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist, offered an alternative theoretical framework in which a large number of political organizations respond actively to regulate the alignment between the ideology of the capitalist elite and the working class through compromise and consent.

The powers-that-be will attempt to align the consent of the majority so as to make it agree with their own objectives (Hall, 1982). Their legitimacy rests on their ability to express the sovereign will. Thus, we cannot separate class cultures and ideologies simply into elite and working class any more; what we can do is to examine dominant, subordinate, and positional cultural and ideological values (Bennett, 1986). The question becomes, how should we conceptualize cultural domination through the media (Newbold, 1995)? We propose here that news as a commodity is one way to conceptualize the media.

2.1 Communication Policy in Theory

An important theoretical point involves communications policy. What regulates the policy of commodity exchange in the nondominant discourse? What occupies this space in the dominant discourse? Several authors in communications journals have called attention to the lack of a role for the discipline of communications in shaping society's treatment of information problems. Like us, Milton Mueller (1995) sees an "extension of *market exchange relations and commodification* (italics ours) into the realm of information, communication, and culture" (p. 458). Private media industries are taking over formerly "protected national markets." Benetton advertising shows "commodification of social issues" (Tinic, 1993). Control, sovereignty, and security are rendered obsolete by new technologies: satellite transmission, computers, internet, and cellular radio. The IMF and the World Bank are exerting pressure to liberalize Post, Telegraph, and Telecommunication (PTT). Structural adjustment programs entail further privatization of public enterprises.

Indeed, the privatization of public telecommunications in the United States becomes part of the problem in media reports about the Third World (Noam, 1987). The Western media need to make money and they look for issues that will attract audiences. Sensationalism or even racism could be driving the litany of Western news events about so-called tribal "Hutu vs. Tutsi warfare" since 1994. This could fit the mold of "commodification." We think a policy of disinformation and censorship by the RPF government should not be ruled out. Major General Paul Kagame, Vice President and Minister of Defense, and President of the RPF, stated that "we used communication and information warfare better than anyone. We have found a new way of doing things" (Gowing, 1998, p. 3). Could propaganda warfare explain the sensationalism and relative absence of reportage about progress in social services, health infrastructure, agriculture, and computerization? We think so, and not just in Africa or the Third World. Commodification looms particularly large and perverse in the U.S. media.

2.2 Communications under National Security Control

In Third World countries, the state often wanted to emulate the technical competence of the Western media and the control function of the former Soviet media (Altschull, 1984). Their media has often lacked balanced treatment of the claims of oppositional agents. Opposing factions and institutions shun radicalism out of fear of retaliation. For a variety of reasons, then, Third World media have often been unable to apply pressure for an elected government, social and economic justice, and the preservation of human rights. How can communications policy best address this "media monopoly" (Bagdikian, 1990; Noam, 1993)?

If telecommunications in developing countries remains to a much greater extent under national security control, scholars must find ways to conceptualize it (Mueller, 1995, p. 463). Rita Abrahamsen (1997) argued that transnational relationships intertwine with national ones in Central Africa, through "the absorption of the enemies' elites." She takes this phrase from Gramsci, who was referring to the elimination of Communists under Fascism. In Africa, civil wars often "decapitate counter-elites" by co-opting their leaders (Abrahamsen, 1997, pp. 148-150; Bayart, 1993). The elite maintains itself in this way, forestalling social-democratic welfarist aspirations because they threaten the established order. Partners in Western capitalist states support the co-optation, called a "passive revolution." They give more importance to elections and formal political rights than to social and economic rights. The media play a crucial role in conveying the various features of a recipient nation's socio-political conditions for investment. Information is deemed too precious a commodity for national survival to be left to market forces. Thus, we are suggesting that commodification may be intentionally managed by corporate news and governments for profit.

A neo-Gramscian model can help us analyze the possible co-optation or even decapitation of news coverage of Rwanda in the Western press (see Woodward & Higiroy, this issue). Is there a free press? If not, how has it been co-opted? It is unavoidable to consider the relation between communications and the state when we look at the commodification of the media. How do donor nations relate to this tiny landlocked country ("the Switzerland of Africa"), situated between Uganda, Burundi, Tanzania, and the Congo? What news coverage alliances with neighbors and the West contribute to "the absorption of the enemies' elites"?

3. Method

Access to official documents in Rwanda since 1994 has proved virtually impossible. As Jan Vansina (1998) remarked recently, "paradoxically, while a huge volume of less valuable documents is available, the small volume of more valuable evidence remains unavailable" (p. 38). Despite an estimated 125 non-governmental organizations in Rwanda (Neubert, 1996), a variety of United Nations agencies, and press releases from the regimes in power, the documents that matter -- policy documents, official communiques, and records of diplomatic activity -- have all been kept secret since 1994. Vansina leveled a particular critique at the Western press and their "official" informants: "the sources are all part of an intense propaganda war" (1998, p. 38). Could the function of international media lie in generating economic support or bolstering claims to power, in enabling leaders to obtain arms or in providing diplomatic cover?

3.1 Qualitative Content Analysis

We began with a qualitative content analysis of some Western news reports disseminated by international media about events occurring in Rwanda and the Great Lakes of Africa (Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, DRC, and Kenya). Very often those international media quote official sources and also those official sources stage events in order to rally national and international opinion around their world view (Myers, Klak, & Kohl, 1996).

We have decided to look primarily at Agence France Press (AFP), Associated Press (AP), Cable News Network (CNN), Inter Press Service (IPS), Reuters, and the Voice of America (VOA). The selection of stories from these news organizations is not based on random sampling. We base it simply on whether this particular news organization published a story on an event in the Great Lakes that was available on the Internet. We group the stories by geographical origination (dateline) and themes. Overall we collected 115 stories over the period November 1997 through May 1998. The distribution of stories by news organization looks as follows: Agence France Presse (AFP) -- 43, Associated Press (AP) -- 5, Cable News Network (CNN) -- 4, Inter Press Service (IP) -- 3, Reuters -- 45, and the Voice of America (VOA) -- 15.

3.2 Themes

We grouped these reports into seven themes. (1) "Human rights" refers to respect for or violation of human rights, (2) "Security" deals with insurgency and army activities. (3) "Foreign relations" refers to international affairs including foreign dignitaries visiting Rwanda. (4) "Hutu Menace in the Great Lakes" has to do with political conflicts in Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Uganda, countries where groups of Tutsis are in power or exert political influence. (5) "Memorializing of the victims" refers to the victims of the genocide. (6) "Economic situation" involves stories about current and past performance of Rwanda, and (7) "Democracy" includes stories about political parties and the election process. For our purposes, building on our theoretical introduction, the seven themes would seem to represent various aspects of the state's public policy and its socio-political interests. For reasons of space, we will limit ourselves to reporting (1) through (3) here, and submit (4) through (7) separately (Woodward & Higiroy, this issue).

3.3 Western Media Convey Dominant Ideology

In theory, the Rwanda's domestic media and our Western media each have a role in conveying and negotiating these interests. In practice, we believe that the media convey the dominant ideology of the RPF. For reasons of accessibility, we have had to limit ourselves to the Western media available on internet; consequently, the media we received conveyed this dominant ideology under each of the seven themes. In this sense, then, ideology has become a commodity. To gain access, these Western journalists have had to cooperate with the state rather than with critical Rwandan journalists or even NGOs. Our paper will expose alternative views, or ideologies, in each thematic area. We preserve Condit's depiction of the subordinate or "unrepresented groups," who in the name of "laws" of justice and through limited (because of the obvious danger) "civic support" dare to contest the dominant ideology.

In fact, as we shall show, human rights monitors have documented numerous disappearances and killings of Rwandan journalists as well as party leaders, professional persons, and NGO employees (Amnesty International, 1999a, 1999b). It is clear by now that any oppositional viewpoints are subject to state intimidation and control.

In turn, one may legitimately ask to what extent Western are media “free” of corporate and authoritarian government influence. This situation represents a harsh form of compromise and consent among agents of the dominant and the subordinate ideology. It also puts a severe challenge on our method, restricted as it is to Western news coverage and our own background knowledge gleaned from other sources.

We distinguish a world hegemony from a RPF hegemony, and both from the NGOs and Hutu peasantry that resist them. The “resisters” include a broad range: NGOs that defend human rights, foreign governments and their institutions, as well as Hutu peasantry, Tutsi survivors of the genocide, Hutu elite opposed to the regime (in Rwanda and in exile), *interahamwe*, former military (FAR), Tutsi dissenters, and Hutu rebels. “World hegemony” refers to Western values embodied in the UN, NGOs, IMF, World Bank, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the international media. “RPF hegemony” then refers to the Tutsi elite and the co-opted Hutu elite, comprising politicians, military, intellectuals, religious and business leaders, state media, private media, educational institutions, courts, army policy, market economy, and all political institutions.

3.4 Author Participation

A special feature of our method bears mentioning. We drew upon the senior author's participation in events up to April 1994. From July 31, 1993 to April 6, 1994, he was director of the Rwandan Information Office (ORINFOR), a state company running Radio Rwanda, Rwandan television, and the public print media. When he and his family hid for their lives and then fled, he had to leave behind all his documents and research collections accumulated since acquiring two master's degrees (history, radio television) and a doctorate (communications) in North America (see authors note). His experience is emblematic of the plight of intellectuals in general.

Following the civil war in summer 1994, while a refugee in Nairobi, he sent a fax accepting the position of minister of information in the RPF government of Prime Minister Faustin Twagiramungu. Having emigrated to the United States later that summer, he then decided not to return home. The fact that he was offered a position in the new RPF administration shows that he had the respect of several sides in the conflict. He was known for presenting oppositional debates in the media. A central issue for Rwandans and for the world is whether civil government has yet been restored in Rwanda. Hopefully this article will help to answer that question.

4. Our Results in Tables

Table 1 indicates that we collected 115 news stories, most of which come from Reuters, AFP, and VOA. Ever since the genocide of Tutsi in 1994, these three news organizations have had correspondents in Kigali. In other words events taking place in Rwanda, especially Rwandan military involvement in DRC, have received attention from the three news organizations. The table also shows that 71 news stories or 61.73% of our sample originated from Kigali. During the time in which we collected these news stories AFP, Reuters, and VOA each had a reporter based in Kigali, an indication that Rwanda has become a priority in the agenda of these international media.

Table 2 rearranges our results by theme. The most popular theme comes first, and so on. Again we display the news story data by news source. The most striking finding is that foreign relations, security, and human rights vastly outweighed other themes such as economic situation or democracy. We proceed now to present the themes in terms of what is said and then to consider what is left out.

4.1 Results - Human Rights

In our sample there were 26 stories about human rights. Most of these stories concerned the prison population that exceeded 125,000, public executions of genocide convicts, the workings of Rwandan tribunals, the assassination of former Minister of Interior Seth Sendashoga, and the abuses by Rwandan military. Official sources quoted by the media indicate that the prison population is large because the genocide destroyed the justice system and there are not enough judges to bring the cases to trial. An official remarked to a news reporter that “the executions were horrendous but had to be done” (Cahn, 1998h). In other words, genocide requires executions through the world view of retribution for sin. This implies that genocide left the government no other choice. This commodification of the news was sold to the Western media in large quantities.

A human rights perspective had meanwhile pointed to extralegal executions on the part of the Rwandan government itself. In March 1998 Amnesty International accused the Rwandan government of violating human rights in its suppression of insurgents by random killing of civilians. We found less news articles in our sample with this perspective. Evidently, this commodification of the one-sided narrative overwhelmed, or perhaps suppressed, the alternative narrative of human rights.

A negotiation concerning Amnesty's human rights claim ensued from the government. As to military abuses, official sources said that *interahamwe* who are genocide suspects mingle with the civilian population, thus civilians become casualties. *Interahamwe*, or Hutu militants, are the genocidal army in the official narrative. According to a Rwandan military spokesperson for the RPF, "when it published unfounded allegations affirming that the [RPF] army had massacred hundreds of unarmed civilians, Amnesty International served the interests of those who in 1994 decimated almost a million people."

To the government, it seemed, questioning human rights abuses is tantamount to becoming an apologist for the genocide. The RPF government sees itself as the only guardian of human rights because anyone else who criticizes the human rights record is a genocide sympathizer or collaborator. Secretary of State Madeline Albright remarked that in the context of genocide, Rwanda's record was not that bad (Anon, 1997b). "Given the history of the genocide . . . we understand how difficult it must be for them," she stated after meeting with Rwandan leaders. This statement reveals how the media may have been effective at commodifying "genocide," since she does not condemn the ongoing human rights abuses of the regime. They were guilty of large scale killings, which were corroborated by on-the-ground, village by village counts of the dead (Davenport & Stam, 2005; C. M. Waugh, 2004).

By contrast, in the same week the High Commissioner of the U. N., Mary Robinson, condemned "the absence of a politics of reconciliation" in Rwanda, noting the existence of "serious violations of human rights, such as arbitrary arrests, prolonged arbitrary detentions, and a serious overpopulation in the prisons" (Lauras, 1997). The media may inadvertently have contributed to preventing efforts to investigate human rights abuses by the RPF.

Finally, the misuse of genocide as a commodity has served to deflect and forestall questions about the fairness and due process of the trials in Rwanda. With regard to the executions of the end of April 1998, there was no due process in most of these cases (Amnesty, Human Rights Watch). For example, Silas Munyagishari, a former Assistant Prosecutor in Kigali, was executed. His case apparently had nothing to do with genocide but with a family vendetta because of his role as an assistant prosecutor in civil cases in which the government wanted him to act unethically (Rosenblum, 1998).

4.2 Results - Security

In our sample, 27 stories dealt with security. Government sources reported by the media indicated that in 1997-1998 Hutu insurgents were operating in the province of Ruhengeri, Gisenyi, Gitarama, and Kigali-Rural. According to these sources, Hutu insurgents were people who were trying to avoid justice because they had committed genocide, who were destabilizing the country, who had stocked ammunition before they fled to neighboring countries or when they were in the refugee camps. They said that these insurgents would run out of ammunition and political support. Insurgency was an issue that would be dealt with very quickly.

What was left out of these news stories, comprising the second highest number in our count? According to Amnesty International (1997b), government soldiers murdered some Rwandan refugees who returned home. Some were murdered for political or economic reasons, e.g., someone wanted their house or their property. In other cases, former Hutu government soldiers, high ranking officers, and junior officers were the targets. However, news sources seem to be silent on such killings. In those news reports, official sources said that children were used to spy on RPF positions and to carry messages: "There are some Hutus in our district who are aiding the *interahamwe*. "They give them our names and the location where we live," declared an old woman, adding that "the list of people who are going to be killed is circulating in our district" (Goujon, 1998c). "Authorities say the rebels could not operate without the assistance of the local population – to mingle and hide and to receive food" (Cahn, 1998f). The child soldier or spy was not something unique to Hutu insurgents. The word *kadogo*, which is a Swahili word for "little", refers in the RPF to those children who served in the RPF army. Children become in this case a legitimate target and killing children is presented as self defense through a narrative that offsets its horrifying nature.

Official sources (transmitted by the Western media) say that those insurgents have no political agenda and do not have support among the population. They are "the rebels, suspected members of the *interahamwe* militia and former Rwandan army", or simply "Hutu rebels" (Anon, 1998a; Cahn, 1998b, 1998e). They are demonized and presented as people who attack with machetes, traditional arms, and guns. They are presented as irrational human beings who are out to wipe out Tutsi who survived the genocide.

These are legitimate grievances against the existing RPF power structure. Hutus are regarded as fourth class citizens in this status hierarchy: 1) Tutsi from Uganda, 2) Tutsi from Burundi, 3) genocide survivors, and then 4) Hutus. It is hard for refugees who were in Zaire to get back their jobs and their houses. These grievances push them to turn against their own government. The commodification of genocide prevents the consumer of news from questioning whether such grievances have generated a genuine insurgency with legitimate demands that should be addressed. No government will talk or suggest talk with genociders once insurgents are labeled as such and the label sticks.

4.3 Results - Foreign Relations

During the period studied, we collected 29 news stories regarding an Amnesty International report on Rwanda, President's Clinton's visit to Rwanda, the French role in Africa as discussed by the National Assembly, and the visit of the Secretary General of the United Nations. Rwandan officials used the media to communicate to the world that its actions should be understood in the context of the genocide, including its human rights record.

Rwandan rulers received President Clinton as a "friend" of the regime in April 1998 (Cahn, 1998d, 1998f; Clancy, 1998). Before Clinton visited Kigali, the Rwandan government built a hastily arranged memorial at the airport so that he could dedicate it. There were differences between American and Rwandan officials about whether he should do so; Americans were against it and finally President Clinton decided to give a memorial plaque. As viewed through the press, this incident represents a struggle over the meaning of the genocide in which the Rwandan government wanted to exploit the genocide as a political commodity.

According to official sources, Rwandans were living in harmony before colonization and Christianization. France is always criticized by the current government as having supported the Habyarimana regime because of the military and humanitarian assistance it gave in 1994; the French rejected the charge and pointed to the U.S. involvement (Comite National, 1998; Anon, 1998b; Anon, 1998d; Raitberger, 1998; Curtenelle, 1998, Anon, 1998g). But countries such as Uganda, and Burundi under Buyoya, which helped the RPF in recruiting fighters among Tutsi refugees are never criticized for their role in political developments of Rwanda since October 1990 (Prunier, 1995, pp. 198, 202, 331; Evans, pp. 60-61). Perhaps their role should be questioned, given the horrifying events that took place in Rwanda.

The U. N. is demonized in Rwanda for its failure to intervene. Genocide survivor groups and the current regime accuse the U. N. of not intervening to stop the genocide. The current regime criticized Secretary General Kofi Annan on his visit in the spring 1998 (Rosenthal, 1998; Kotch, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 1998d). Yet the United States and the RPF itself were also opposed to intervention in Rwanda as the genocide of Tutsi was being carried out.

Foreign visitors are popular with Rwandan ruling elites as long as they condemn genocide and overlook human rights abuses by the current regime. The Clinton visit illustrates this point. Attitudes in the press toward foreign countries need to be viewed through the same lens. The commodification of genocide helps reconstruct events and impose a meaning on them. It helps the RPF regime assert its place in the international public sphere.

5. Conclusion

We have shown the connection of external politics of the hegemony of the Tutsi elite in the Great Lakes with the internal politics of security. Namely, "genocide" justifies indiscriminate killings and political assassinations, disappearances and property takeovers. This genocide ideology in the Western media presents only one side of the ongoing security problem and the news becomes a commodity of political warfare.

We see pseudostability here. Newspaper bylines signal that all is not well: "Echo of 1994 genocide: Rwanda slayings persist," "On and on it goes," and "Africa's revival: Over so soon?" (Santoro, 1998a; Anon, 1998k; Santoro, 1998b). Yet the foreign aid continues to flow to Rwanda's present government. Violations of human rights should be prosecuted regardless of who committed them. A debate goes on about political conditionality, the tying of aid to political reforms leading toward democracy and the rule of law.

From a Gramscian perspective, an internal - external dichotomy (RPF/Tutsi good, Hutu evil) ignores the kinds of interdependence that characterize our argument for commodification. International relations involves not just aid dollars, but legitimation. So far, the International Tribunal for Rwanda has dealt with Hutu leaders only. The West must find a way to keep its assistance and endorsements tied to interdependent relationships, not to momentary victors (Weiss & Cherniavsky, 1998; Physicians for Human Rights, 1998; Straus & Waldorf, 2011). To do so, it must develop a keener eye for propaganda and its dominant ideology of genocide.

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