

---

## Original Article

# A concern for humanity? Anglo-American press coverage of Bosnia and Rwanda, 1992–1995

David Patrick

University of the Free State, 205 Nelson Mandela Drive, Bloemfontein 9301, South Africa.

E-mail: davidbutchpatrick@gmail.com

**Abstract** This article provides findings from a detailed analysis concerning Anglo-American newspaper coverage of the conflicts in Bosnia (1992–1995) and Rwanda (1994). A comparison of the response to both crises evidences three things. First, Rwanda received less attention than Bosnia despite the former witnessing more deaths in a shorter time frame. Second, the violence was only of primary concern in specific instances with other issues, such as Western involvement, often being prioritised. Third, to varying degrees, the victims were often caricatured or otherwise marginalised. The findings therefore ask us to consider factors such as the qualitative nature of the violence, proximity of the violence, and perception of the victims when trying to interpret Anglo-American media responses to mass violence. It seems that genocide in itself is not always deemed important enough to warrant coverage, the implications of which need to be factored into future thinking on the Responsibility to Protect.

*International Politics* (2016) **53**, 138–153. doi:10.1057/ip.2015.41

**Keywords:** Rwanda; Bosnia; media coverage; humanity; responsibility to protect

---

... if humanitarian intervention is, indeed, an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should we respond to a Rwanda, to a Srebrenica – to gross and systematic violations of human rights that affect every precept of our common humanity?  
Kofi Annan (1999)

## Introduction

Reflecting on the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan posed the above question to the United Nations General Assembly in 1999. Responding to this in 2001, The International Commission on Intervention and State

Sovereignty published its seminal report, *The Responsibility to Protect* (RtoP), in which it set out a series of recommendations. These paved the way for the unanimous endorsement of the RtoP agreement as expressed in paragraphs 138, 139 and 140 of the World Summit Outcome Document. Broadly speaking however, it seems that the Commissioners set out to answer Annan's question without pausing to interrogate the assumptions that underpin it, as he appeals to the notion of a 'common humanity' with international responsibilities invoked accordingly. As the Editors discuss in the introduction to this special issue, this forms part of a broader problem as scholars and policymakers often fall foul of presenting a 'common humanity' as a self-evident truth. Addressing this, the article analyses Anglo-American media reporting of Bosnia and Rwanda and, in so doing, highlights an apparent indifference to human suffering – even during instances severe enough to satisfy virtually every accepted definition of *genocide*. These case studies demonstrate that *genocide in itself* is not considered to be as important an issue as Western rhetoric often suggests, and provide several examples of how the idea of common humanity is often easily subverted (or even ignored) when competing with more forceful narratives, such as 'national interest', or when filtered through the prism of established racial and cultural stereotypes. Certainly, to quote Kershaw (2008), 'the liberal assumption that people will instinctively defend other human beings against mass slaughter seems at least questionable', and the implications of this for the future implementation and effectiveness of the *RtoP* will be commented upon in the conclusion.

For the purposes of clarity it is necessary to first explain the parameters of the data set(s) that informed this study. A total of eight newspapers were selected for analysis, four from the United States and four from Britain. The American titles chosen were *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Chicago Tribune*; while *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Independent* were selected from the British press. To provide seven-day coverage a Sunday equivalent was chosen for each British title, these being: *The Sunday Times*, *The Observer*, *The Sunday Telegraph* and *The Independent on Sunday*.

For each of the two case studies selected, a total sample size of 114 days was chosen. This number was arrived at by the fact that the Rwandan case study was selected first, and stems from the 100-day duration of the genocide added to a further 2 weeks – included so as to allow analysis of the refugee crisis which followed the violence. Starting with the day immediately following the assassination of President Juvenal Habyarimana, the date range for the study of Rwanda is therefore 7 April–29 July 1994. Given that the sample size for the Rwandan case was 114 days, it was decided that for purposes of easy comparison the sample size for Bosnia would be the same.<sup>1</sup>

It should also be highlighted that none of this research was carried out using digitised databases, primarily because early trials with this system revealed relevant articles not appearing within the given search parameters. Instead, the data collection for this article was based on physically accessing microfilm copies of a total of 1824



individual newspapers and, as such, all statistical observations cited are based on the author's own primary research (conducted 2009–2012).

Essentially, this article challenges the old newsroom expression that 'if it bleeds, it leads', for as the examples provided within this article seek to illustrate, this was not necessarily the case in the early 1990s (Gourevitch, 2000). While the mass violence in Bosnia and Rwanda was by no means ignored (as has been asserted by scholars in the past), it remains the case that Anglo-American reporting of both Bosnia and Rwanda was characterised at various times by: a misunderstanding of the dynamics of each conflict, a discourse which had its roots in established Western notions regarding the peoples of Africa and the Balkans; a general trend towards marginalising coverage of the violence itself in favour of reporting other developments, notably those involving Western actions or interests; and, ultimately, an *indifference to the suffering*, which can be invoked from a number of quantitative and qualitative observations. In addition to this, it will be argued that magnitude of violence (at least in terms of absolute numbers killed) is no determinant of coverage, and that geographical proximity to the West, and the nature of said violence, are found to have a greater influence on Anglo-American press interest.

The article is structured in the following format. First, it presents overall statistical findings from the quantitative analysis of the chosen case studies. Second, it looks at the characterisation of victims, drawing attention to the fact that the press often caricatured or otherwise marginalised the affected group(s). Third, it highlights that the qualitative nature of violence is an influential factor in determining levels of press coverage; using relevant examples to illustrate the fact that only particular forms of suffering are found to be considered worthy of concentrated attention from the Anglo-American press. In each section, the influence of the respective findings to ideas of 'common humanity' will be discussed, with the wider implications of these combined observations – in relation to the *RtoP* – being explored in the conclusion.

## Overall Statistical Findings

A key observation that presents itself through this research is the realisation that, in relation to Anglo-American reporting of genocidal events, body-counts do not determine the extent of coverage. The most obvious illustration for this comes from a direct comparison of press interest in Rwanda and Bosnia. The Rwandan genocide saw the deaths of some 800 000 people in just over 3 months, while the conflict in the Balkans witnessed around 200 000 killed in 3 years – meaning that the average monthly death toll in Rwanda was some 48 times that which was recorded in Bosnia. Nonetheless, the latter completely eclipsed the former in terms of Anglo-American press coverage across any number of measures. For each and every variable selected within this research, Bosnia received noticeably more coverage than Rwanda over their respective 114-day samples. This finding alone challenges the concept of there

being any understanding or acceptance of a 'common humanity', in that such a notion would surely be determined largely on the principle of equality of victimhood, if one might call it such.

Quantifying the number of news articles (that is, *not* including editorials, comment pieces or letters) illustrates the contrast between the reporting of these two events. While Rwanda commanded 1233 articles between 7 April and 29 July 1994, this figure was easily outmatched by the 3028 articles recorded concerning Bosnia within a comparable time frame. In terms of showing any notable 'collective national bias' with reference to article production, this was much more pronounced in the reporting of the Balkans. Of this total, 1819 (60 per cent) were found in British publications and 1209 (40 per cent) were published in American sources; whereas, in the reporting of Rwanda, a much smaller contrast between British and American outlets was recorded – with 641 (52 per cent) and 592 (48 per cent), respectively.

In terms of editorial coverage, those related to Bosnia numbered 183 over the 114-day analysis, a total, which was more than three times the 54 printed that discussed Rwanda in some fashion. An even greater difference in coverage was recorded in relation to comment pieces, with 383 concerning Bosnia being published to Rwanda's total of 70. The greatest quantitative difference recorded, however, was in relation to the number of letters published over the respective periods analysed. While 61 letters were published between 7 April and 29 July 1994, which directly concerned the conflict in Rwanda, this was dwarfed by the 454 letters printed in relation to Bosnia within its own data set – a ratio of almost 7.5:1 in favour of the latter example.

In terms of an overall comparison; when articles are combined with editorials, comment and letters, 'total reporting' of the Rwandan genocide equates to some 1418 separate inclusions over the dates selected. This is an indication that this event did indeed command the attention of Western journalists, though it should also be remembered that a number of these pieces were small in size and often relegated to poor placing within the publications in which they appeared. With regards to the Bosnian example, when all sources are combined, the figure for total reporting is 4048 – meaning that the aspects of the Bosnian crisis selected for this research generated around 2.9 times as much coverage as the Rwandan genocide. This contrast demonstrates that proximity and geopolitical significance are more critical factors in determining press responses to genocide, rather than that journalistic focus being driven by a notion of common humanity. There is, of course, also an unavoidable racial element to these quantitative discrepancies between the chosen case studies – an observation which, though unpalatable, further complicates the feasibility or legitimacy of the existence of anything approaching an accepted 'common humanity'.

Further to these statistical observations, and indeed reinforced by them, is the realisation that body counts alone are not seen to have any notable impact on levels of Anglo-American newspaper coverage. To illustrate this; less than a week into the slaughter, a *Washington Post* article estimated that perhaps 100 000 people had been killed in the violence engulfing Rwanda (Parmelee, 1994a). Interestingly though,



despite citing this figure only five days into the conflict – meaning that an average of 20 000 people had been murdered *every day* since Habyarimana’s plane crash – this figure was hidden away within the body of an article, which itself was relegated to page 13.

This figure of 100 000 dead was widely circulated in the weeks that followed, though it seldom received the prominence which it should have commanded – illustrated by its citing in a 28 April edition of *The Times* where this figure was confined to a 34-word piece on page 15 (Reuter, 1994). Likewise, in an edition of *The Daily Telegraph*, this death toll was even framed as being of secondary importance to the news that tennis star, Boris Becker was being blackmailed (Peterson, 1994). This subjugation of the violence to celebrity culture was a common feature in the early months of the conflict, though. On 10 April, the headline ‘“8000 butchered” in Rwanda capital’ (Lambert, 1994) actually made it onto the front page of the *Independent on Sunday*, though it was relegated to a corner mention as the fact that Freddie Starr’s horse had won the Grand National was considered to be worthy of greater publicity.

Former *Boston Globe* correspondent Tom Palmer once argued that, ‘People being killed is definitely a good, objective story’, adding ‘And innocent people being killed is better’. (cited in Moeller, 1999) This reasoning certainly sounds like it would be adhered to but, as both Rwanda and Bosnia demonstrate, this is not automatically the case; and raises serious questions about our concern for a common humanity. The common assertion may be that genocide is a crime, which concerns the entire human race, but that geographical/racial distinctions are seen to impact levels of Western media interest to a far more influential degree than absolute numbers of victims provides sufficient evidence to challenge this widely held rhetorical assumption.

## Characterisation of Victims

Despite their obvious statistical contrasts in terms of total journalistic coverage, Rwanda and Bosnia did share a commonality in that their respective victim groups (along with the general inhabitants of both affected regions) were consistently marginalised and/or caricatured within Anglo-American reporting of their respective conflicts.

Before the early 1990s, when the conflict in Bosnia deteriorated to the point of ethnic cleansing, war and genocide, there was already an established Western discourse concerning the Balkans and its peoples. While most of these assumptions and ideas were based on stereotypes or mythologies that were, in some cases, hundreds of years old, certain Western perceptions of the Balkans proved difficult to dislodge and this, in turn, had an impact on how the Anglo-American press subsequently characterised and explained the violence as it unfolded between 1992–1995.

A dominant frame, which emerged in this analysis, echoing a discourse that had been established in the West for many years (Todorova, 2009), was that the conflict in Bosnia was the result of ancient hatreds that had long been festering in the region. Even those commentators who were cautious advocates of intervention would often describe the conflict in such terms, though the notion that ‘ancestral’ or ‘ancient’ grievances were behind the slaughter was far more prevalent in the writings of those contributors who did *not* wish for the Western powers to get involved (Rimer, 1995). As the conflict developed over the years, this belief – that Bosnia was somehow predestined to erupt into violence – was consistently repeated. Commentators, most of whom it is clear had no real understanding of Balkan history, would speak of Bosnia returning to ‘its old traditions’, (Fox, 1992) while one particular contribution asserted that the Balkans was a ‘region that cannot handle freedom for more than five minutes’ (Birchill, 1995).

Continuing this dismissal of the Balkans and its inhabitants, O’Brien (1992) would describe the region as being ‘full of people who enjoy killing people, and don’t mind risking their own lives in pursuit of their favourite pastime’, and though this example is one of the more direct and extreme laments on Bosnia, it is nonetheless representative of a trend which was common throughout the reporting on the conflict. Further to this; regardless of the fact that Serb forces were behind the majority of war crimes committed during the Bosnian wars, several newspapers were at pains to stress the *equal guilt* of all sides. This persisted throughout the conflict, to varying degrees, with one such argument coming from Eyal (1992), who argued that ‘Whatever ethnic paradise Bosnia may have been in the past’, the reality was that ‘most of its people would love to slit each other’s throats’.

Even by 1995, 3 years into the conflict and in the midst of a renewed wave of Serb assaults – which climaxed in the now infamous slaughter of Srebrenica – commentators continued to voice the opinion that ‘all parties’ within the Balkans were ‘on a par for atrocities’. (Smithers, 1995). One journalist, Prentice (1995), would further this notion, in addition to perhaps attempting to excuse Serbian excesses, by commenting that: ‘Television coverage of Bosnian Serb “death camps”, Muslim refugees, and shell-pocked villages has been largely responsible for conjuring the impression that almost the only victims are Muslims...But it has become apparent that elements on all sides have been as vile *as they have had the capacity to be*’ (emphasis added). Being both persistent throughout the conflict and observed across a range of titles, the explicitly negative characterisation of a victimised group in this manner thus offers little to support the case for the existence of a common humanity. Whilst any notion of common humanity does not refer to a humanity which is a homogenous collective, devoid of any cultural or societal distinctions, the persistence and utility of (often entrenched) stereotypes like the ones listed ensures that those caricatured as violent/less civilized/more barbaric than ourselves in the West are perceived as inherently different.



As has been commented upon in the years since, the Rwandan genocide was also misinterpreted from the very beginning (Thompson, 2007), and this filtered into how it was reported on in the press. Although it was in reality a meticulously planned exercise, the violence destroying Rwanda was more often than not characterised as being out of control and/or resulting from anarchic *tribal hatreds*. The organised slaughter was consistently described as being a ‘free-for-all’ (Parmelee, 1994b) – giving the impression that what was occurring was akin to an entire country gone insane – while descriptions such as ‘orgy of violence’ (Luce, 1994) were similarly prevalent; a characterisation of the violence, which implied that the violence was more of a collective emotional outburst, rather than a top-down programme of pre-planned murder against perceived ethnic and political enemies. The following extract from an early newspaper report on Rwanda gives a further illustrative example of how the facts were often grossly misconstrued: ‘The unfolding violence appears to be a three-sided tribal war pitting well-armed members of the Hutu dominated presidential guard unit against followers of the mainly Tutsi resistance movement known as the Rwandan Patriotic Front. Units of the Rwandan army, meanwhile, are fighting both and being attacked by both’. (Healy and Marshall, 1994).

As was the case with Anglo-American coverage of the Balkans, this manner of reporting the Rwandan genocide largely conformed to a more generalised, pre-existing Western discourse regarding the African continent and its inhabitants. One aspect of this discourse was the notion of Africans as being ‘savage’ or ‘brutal’ – a conceptualisation which mirrors that which evolved regarding the people of the Balkans. This reflects a discourse, strengthened and emphasised throughout the colonial period and beyond, that perceived Africa as being below the level of development achieved in the West. A central component of this idea is that the continent stagnated, both technologically and culturally, in the centuries before Western colonisation – a myth, which Hodgkin (1957) describes as the ‘Hobbesian picture of a pre-European Africa, in which there was no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society ...’. The insistence that Western discourse regarding Africa has commonly invoked the notion of brutality and incivility has been further noted by Brookes (1995) who, in her study of British newspaper coverage of Africa, found that Western discourse largely framed the continent as somewhere that ‘may try to emulate the West, but just below the surface the sorcery and savagery lurk’.

As Peterson (2000) has noted, by the 1990s Africa had become a continent that was ‘known more for its production of spectacles than for its contribution to the good of humankind’, and this was how the genocide was framed in a number of cases. As unpalatable as this devaluation of human life is, there are a number of academics who subscribe to this explanation for the lack of interest in the genocide. Certainly, as one letter to the *Guardian* argued, ‘African lives no longer invoke compassion but their death is merely expressed in the sheer enormity of the numbers involved’ (Lume, 1994). Quotations and observations such as these further question the applicability of the *Responsibility to Protect*, as they illustrate the clear discrepancy

in the apparent empathy we feel for different groups. That such cataclysmic numbers of African dead can struggle to hold (or even gain) the concentrated attention of the Western media also refutes the existence of a 'common humanity', a conclusion that is all the more relevant to future responses to mass violence as any number of models project such atrocities to take place in the developing (that is, non-Western) regions of the world.

This manner of framing is important to this research, primarily because it demonstrates how journalists can construct and tailor a narrative of mass violence that both minimises its overall exposure *and* marginalises or caricatures the victims affected. While many journalists continue to stress that they 'view themselves as neither part of the story nor as creators of the story', believing that they simply 'report the facts as they see them' (Johnson-Cartee, 2005), since any event can be covered in a variety of different ways, this notion of 'objectivity' is a self-delusion, with most journalists demonstrating far more creative freedom in their own narratives that they would often like to admit. Essentially, individual journalists enjoy a fair degree of creative expression in how they present and frame an event, development, region or people; but despite this, it was observed that reporting of both conflicts largely conformed to a pattern which saw the marginalisation of the victims themselves – demonstrating that an appeal to a common humanity is not a driving force for the elite Anglo-American press.

These observations again test the validity of any concept which presupposes that a common humanity exists, at least not in the sense that victims of mass violence can expect any press interest they receive to result from a journalistic feeling of a shared humanity with those affected. Indeed, where pre-established ideas of a people or region have been reinforced for decades to establish a narrative whereby the affected group are constructed as less civilized (re: human) than ourselves in the developed world, the persistence of such attitudes indicates a challenge to the building of a genuine notion of a common humanity.

## Importance of Qualitative Nature of Violence

As well as illustrating the quantitative differences in terms of Anglo-American press coverage of Bosnia and Rwanda, a key finding of this research was that the *nature* of an atrocity was seen to be a more crucial determinant of press coverage than the overall *scale* of the violence (in terms of numbers killed). In essence, the *manner* in which people are being killed is more important than *how many* are affected. The following section provides selected observations to highlight this phenomenon, with the most illustrative of these being the period surrounding the discovery of concentration camps in Bosnia in August 1992, and the refugee crisis that followed the Rwandan genocide in July 1994.

Across the eight titles analysed, from the period 1–28 August 1992, 857 news articles were devoted to Bosnia. This accounted for 28.3 per cent of *all* articles across





the entire project, and represented the most prolific of the four selected periods in this regard. British publications, in particular, paid a great deal of attention to Bosnia during this time, with only *The Independent* not seeing August 1992 as its most productive 28/29 day period in terms of article publication. Of the 857 articles produced, 538 (62.7 per cent) were from British sources and 319 (37.3 per cent) from American. The title with the highest number of articles was *The Guardian*, which published 149 in total; a stark contrast to the 62 printed by the least productive title, *The Los Angeles Times*. It should not be thought, however, that these were ‘outliers’ in their coverage. British titles consistently devoted more column inches to Bosnia during this period, with *The Daily Telegraph* – the British title with the lowest count (126) – still outmatching the 100 articles published by the most productive American title, *The New York Times*.

In terms of editorial coverage, some 55 lead articles were produced within this 28-day time frame – a number which, in itself, was greater than the 54 editorials dedicated to Rwanda over the *entire* 114-day period from 7 April–29 July 1994. Of these 55 editorials, which represented 30 per cent of all those produced across the four periods analysed, 37 were British in origin and 18 appeared in American titles. This discrepancy between the US and the UK editorial coverage – in that two thirds were produced in Britain – can perhaps be explained by the fact that, at this time, British involvement in Bosnia was seen as being far more likely.

When all *opinion* contributions (including editorials, letters and comment pieces) produced between 1–28 August 1992 are added together, a total of 344 is recorded. The comparable total for Rwanda, across the *entire* 114-day period of its analysis, is only 185. Essentially, almost double the number of opinion articles were produced in regards to Bosnia in only 28 days than was the case for Rwanda over 114. Taken together, these statistics clearly illustrate the comparatively greater level of coverage devoted to Bosnia during August 1992, a trend which was certainly influenced by the discovery of concentration camps operating in Europe for the first time in two generations.

Although it would be the first week of August before pictures of the camps reached Western living rooms, the first journalistic article was published on 19 July, by Roy Gutman of the American daily, *Newsday* (Semelin, 2007). With a particular focus on the soon to be notorious Omarska, Gutman’s single report was the trickle that would turn into a flood of publicity in only a few short weeks. Though concentration camps and the conditions in them were referenced and debated, albeit briefly, in the days following this first revelation, it was an ITN news report on 6 August that sparked concentrated interest in the Balkans. In what was described at the time as a ‘world scoop’ (Miller, 1992) and later as ‘probably the most memorable single piece of journalism of the entire conflict’, (Silber and Little, 1996) Penny Marshall and some British colleagues captured the first television images of a Serb-run camp, at Trnopolje.

The images presented in the ITN report, of emaciated, shaven-headed inmates peering out from behind barbed wire enclosures, was to prove a dramatic turning

point in early coverage of the war. Although the Bosnian conflict certainly *had* been covered in considerable detail, at least in comparison to most other overseas wars, it was not until the disclosure of the existence of the camps that the story took on a whole new level of interest. The coverage of conditions, which were, at least in part, reminiscent of the likes of Belsen or Auschwitz (though on a much less catastrophic scale) sparked an interest in the Western press which was unmatched throughout the duration of the war. Not even the organised massacre at Srebrenica, which saw the murder of 7000 men and boys in the space of only a few days, could match the intense level of press interest sparked by Omarska, Manjaca and others.

That the concentration camps in Bosnia should have sparked such uproar is perhaps unsurprising, however, since the Holocaust is one of the most-documented events in modern history (Hartmann, 2002). Though the similarities between the Nazi genocide of the Jews and the atrocities in Bosnia were actually very few, the fact that some key occurrences and observations mirrored the crimes of the Second World War was enough to convince many commentators that framing the conflict through this historical lens was legitimate.

One of the important similarities was the practice of the Serbs to utilise rolling stock to transport potential inmates – the vast majority of whom were civilians – away from those areas which they wished to ‘cleanse’. Indeed, the brutal transportation of these individuals gained several prominent mentions even *before* Penny Marshall’s emotive report on the camps themselves, with the following extract, from Lewis (1992), representative of a number of accounts from early August 1992: ‘The men were taken from the village at gunpoint and forced into freight cars. As many as 180 were jammed, standing, into boxcars measuring 39 by 6 feet. They were kept that way for three days, without water or food, as the train moved slowly across the countryside. Nazis transporting Jews in 1942? No, Serbs transporting Muslim Bosnians in 1992: one glimpse of the worst racial and religious bestiality Europe has known since World War II’.

While Holocaust analogies were first invoked in response to these transportations, the quantity of such comparisons inevitably increased once the destination of these same human shipments was ascertained (Kushner, 1994).

It was soon a rarity for the camps to be discussed in comment pieces and editorials without some allusion to the Second World War era, and several articles also invoked this comparison for purposes of illustration. One such editorial piece described the ethnic cleansing process as being ‘horribly reminiscent of the *Judenfrei* policies of the Third Reich’, (Editorial, 1992a) while a letter printed in *The Times* asserted that the stories emanating from Bosnia bore ‘an uncanny resemblance in manner, if not in scale, to those which disfigured humanity half a century ago’ (Sacks, 1992). The pictures of emaciated prisoners, incarcerated behind barbed wire fences were, therefore, the first physical repetitions of a historical occurrence with which many had been slowly familiarised over the previous years. The ‘scars of memory’ over the



Nazi period were suddenly reopened, and the press were quick to devote considerable attention to this development (Editorial, 1992b).

The main catalyst for such emotive and opinionated discussions of Bosnia was of course the fact that concentration camps were seen to be being utilised for the purposes of ethnic cleansing. Even if in scale and intent they were at a different end of the genocide spectrum, the reports and images coming out of the Balkans were too similar in nature to the crimes of the Nazi period to be ignored. An influential factor in this was the centrality in the Western psyche of the abstract notion of the concentration camp – once described by Sofsky (2003) as ‘the central institution of violence in modern persecution’, – and the cumulative process of publicising the Holocaust in the Western world that reached its arguable peak in the early 1990s. Indeed, the fact that such a spike in coverage had occurred in response to these particular revelations was remarked upon by contemporary analysts, who were mindful of the influence that such Holocaust-like images had on reporting. In explaining the sudden interest in the atrocities in Bosnia, Coughlin and Sherwell (1992) stated: ‘This is all because the emotive phrase “concentration camps” has returned to haunt all those “good Europeans” who believed that the new Europe of the Maastricht Treaty and the ERM would be safe from the horrors of 50 years ago’.

Perhaps this observation is to be somewhat expected, however, since it could be argued that by the early 1990s the Holocaust was more firmly established in Anglo-American culture than at any other time. This trend was illustrated by the research of James Carroll, which showed that major newspapers in the US printed more stories on the Holocaust in the period between 1990 and 1997 than during the previous 45 years combined (Carroll, 1997). Indeed, such was the concentrated coverage during this period that 1993 was dubbed ‘the year of the Holocaust,’ (Shandler, 1997) the greatest driver of this popularization being the release of *Schindler’s List* – a motion picture which, more than any other, brought the Holocaust into the realm of mainstream cinema. The cumulative process of publicising the Holocaust in the Western world over previous decades, therefore, goes a long way towards explaining the degree of coverage afforded to Bosnia in August 1992.

Across the entire study of both Rwanda and Bosnia, the period from 1–28 August 1992 was the most prolific recorded for each and every quantified variable – illustrating that the *qualitative nature* of a given outbreak of mass violence is a greater determinant of coverage than *absolute numbers killed* in that same carnage. Indeed, William Shawcross unwittingly predicted this a decade before the likes of Bosnia and Rwanda, arguing that ‘only when something can be compared, perhaps rightly, perhaps wrongly, but always plausibly, with the Holocaust will it assume truly disastrous proportions in our perceptions’ (cited in Bischooping and Kalmin, 1999). Put another way, one may interpret the degree of journalistic coverage devoted to Bosnia in this period as evidence of the rhetorical weight of the Holocaust in providing an appropriately horrific frame through which to present it to a Western audience. But, in this particular instance, journalistic reference to what was arguably

the last century's greatest crime should not be regarded as an indication that other mass atrocities – with no aesthetic or functional link to the Holocaust – will ever be a 'concern for humanity'.

Evidence to support this proposition – that the qualitative nature of violence is crucial in determining extent of press coverage – also presents itself when Anglo-American reporting of Rwanda is analysed. While the violence in the central-African state received something approaching consistent (though sparse) coverage throughout its duration, notable increases in levels of reporting only appeared during those periods where the conflict was affecting, or being affected by, outside actors – the most notable examples of this being the evacuation of foreign nationals out of the country in mid-April 1994; the French-led intervention in June; and the refugee crisis that peaked in late July.

Interestingly, what these trends indicate then is that the violence which actually contributed to this event becoming recognised as 'genocide' was generally of secondary importance in determining levels of Anglo-American press coverage. This was not aided by the fact that few people in the West had even heard of Rwanda; and those who had could scarcely explain the politics behind the developing crisis (Katz, 1994). As Dowden (2007) would later note, 'it was a small country far way in a continent that rarely hit the headlines ... the words Hutu and Tutsi sounded funny'.

With a plethora of international developments vying for the attention of Western editors, African issues often became marginalised when it came to coverage, on account of the fact that the continent was seen to have few tangible links with Anglo-American interests. Certainly, Gourevitch (2000) was not far wrong when he quipped that Rwanda may as well have been 'on Mars', with the country's political and strategic isolation ensuring that it was only certain developments during the crisis which were seen to promote an increase in the number of different articles produced. Again, this illustrates the influence of 'proximity' in determining Anglo-American press interest in genocidal events; however, developments in the Rwandan conflict, which involved some form of 'Western angle' were seen to temporarily re-focus the attention of the British and American press.

The first observation to be highlighted was recorded at the beginning of the chosen date range, with there being a noticeable difference recorded between the first 12 days (7–18 April) following Habyarimana's assassination, when the evacuation of foreigners from the country was taking place; and the last 12 days of this month (19–30 April), after which this same process had been completed. Across the selected titles, a total of 157 articles were produced on Rwanda in the first 12 days of the genocide. On the 12 days up to 30 April, however, only 92 articles were published.

What makes these statistics all the more revelatory is that the period following the evacuation of Western nationals ushered in the most intensive period of killing of the entire genocide – and yet the press actually scaled back their coverage during this time. Interestingly, one letter published on 14 April surmised that the 'press attention on Rwanda [was] sure to drop to near zero following the evacuation of Europeans',

(Boles *et al.*, 1994) showing that this phenomenon was even identified, to a degree, during the crisis itself. Put simply, as a development, the early violence itself did not provoke press interest in any noticeable or concentrated way. In fact, following the evacuation of foreign nationals, it would not be until the genocide started to affect, or be affected by, outsiders that it would again have its moment in the media spotlight (Thompson, 2007). This Western-centric focus of reporting further challenges the idea of ‘common humanity’ which underpins doctrine such as the *Responsibility to Protect*, given that in this instance a comparatively tiny group of white foreigners were seen to be regarded as more important than tens of thousands of Africans.

Another event which briefly fell within the glare of the media spotlight was the intervention of the French which took place in mid-to-late June 1994. To illustrate the increase in coverage prompted by the French intervention, consider the following statistics: Between 1 June and 15 June, before the intervention took place, 115 articles were produced regarding Rwanda. Between 16–30 of June on the other hand, by which point the French were heavily involved in Rwanda, the number of articles devoted to the crisis jumped to 155. This increase in coverage was especially apparent amongst British sources, which devoted only 46 articles to Rwanda in the first half of June and 81 in the second. As there were few other notable developments during this time, then it is safe to assume that it was the ‘French angle’, which prompted this short-term increase. It is curious though that a change in the death toll from 10 000 to 100 000, or even 500 000, never provoked the same press interest as that which accompanied a handful of French troops entering the country.

By far the most influential development during the Rwandan crisis, at least in terms of the collective number of articles produced, was the catastrophic refugee crisis that spilled over the country’s borders in July 1994. A total of 400 articles were published in this month, notably higher than that recorded in the April (249), May (314) and June (270) that preceded it. What suddenly made Rwanda news-worthy during this period was the mass refugee movement, which followed the rebel victory in the civil war – an event that dictated a degree of coverage which the genocide itself never achieved. Beginning to take a firm hold between 16 and 19 July, by the last 2 weeks of that month the flood of people across Rwanda’s borders was featuring prominently for days at a time (Randal, 1994). In fact, between 16–29 July 1994 there were 12 occasions where a given newspaper devoted *two* front-page articles to the crisis in Rwanda – a level of publicity only ever repeated on one occasion in the entire one hundred days which preceded this period, in the 13 April 1994 edition of *The Independent*.

When another small period, between 15 July and 29 July, is analysed it becomes immediately clear just how significantly the refugee crisis featured in the Western press. In the eight newspapers selected, 270 articles were published between these two dates. This is quite remarkable when it is realised that this equals the total number of articles published for the *entire* month of June, and surpasses the total of 249 recorded for 7–30 April.



These examples demonstrate how the Rwandan genocide was rarely, if ever, a main story – except for those times where Western actors were seen to be affecting, or being affected by, the wider conflict. That the actions of a handful of Western nationals could consistently provide the only apparent catalyst for an increase in newspaper coverage of Rwanda, amidst a genocidal campaign, which was widely known to have killed hundreds of thousands of civilians in only a few months, makes the idea of such violence truly being a ‘concern for humanity’ more difficult to accept.

## Conclusion

Taken together, what the selected observations illustrate is that genocidal violence, despite being condemned at the highest levels, often fails to command concentrated interest from the Anglo-American press on its own merits. That cumulative death tolls provide little indication of media interest, as discussed in the first empirical section, challenges the any concept of ‘common humanity’, in that there is nothing in the form of equality of victimhood. Notions of a common humanity are also brought into question with the realisation that the *nature* of a given atrocity is seen to be a far greater determinant of Western news coverage than the *scale* of that same violence. Further, even in those instances where a given event *is* afforded Anglo-American media attention, it is found that the victims affected are nonetheless caricatured and stereotyped in a manner which minimises their suffering. All these points considered, these pose a number of crucial challenges to the underlying principle (that we are all part of a common humanity) of the *Responsibility to Protect*, and provide evidence to argue that such high-minded rhetoric is, in actuality, little more than a façade.

## About the Author

Dr David Patrick received his PhD from the University of Sheffield, Department of History, in 2013 for his thesis: ‘Framing Disinterest: Anglo-American Press Responses to the Holocaust, Bosnia and Rwanda’. His primary research interests are responses to genocide and mass violence; and framing (of various issues) within the Anglo-American press. He is currently a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of the Free State (South Africa).

## Note

1 This presented some difficulties, as the crisis in the Balkans lasted more than three years and a random sample of 114 days would not be suitably representative of how the press covered major developments during the conflict. To counter this, four specific events were chosen around which in-depth analysis



could be conducted – with each specific period being either 28 or 29 days in length. Following a review of secondary literature concerning Bosnia, the four events selected (the discovery of concentration camps in August 1992; the February 1994 shelling of Markale marketplace; the fall of Srebrenica in July 1995; and the August 1995 attack on Sarajevo, which prompted a NATO response) were ultimately chosen because they involved a notable instance of mass atrocity. With reference to the above events, the resulting data set concerning Bosnia was therefore based on the following date ranges: 1–28 August 1992; 29 January–26 February 1994; 7 July–3 August 1995; 21 August–18 September 1995.

## References

- Annan, K. (1999) Secretary General presents his Annual Report to General Assembly. New York, 20 September.
- Bischoping, K. and Kalmin, A. (1999) Public opinion about comparisons to the Holocaust. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 63(4): 485–507.
- Boles, C. *et al* (1994) Back to Fear? *The Guardian* 14 April, p. 23.
- Brookes, H.J. (1995) ‘Suit, tie and a touch of Juju’ – The ideological construction of Africa: A critical discourse analysis of news on Africa in the British press. *Discourse Society* 6(4): 461–494.
- Burchill, J. (1995) Jaw-jaw not war-war in the bar. *The Sunday Times* 23 July, section 3, p.6.
- Carroll, J. (1997) Shoah in the News: Patterns and Meanings of News Coverage of the Holocaust, Discussion Paper D-27, October, Harvard University, [http://www.hks.harvard.edu/presspol/publications/papers/discussion\\_papers/d27\\_carroll.pdf](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/presspol/publications/papers/discussion_papers/d27_carroll.pdf).
- Coughlin, C. and Sherwell, P. (1992) The week the world woke up. *The Sunday Telegraph* 9 August, p. 17.
- Dowden, R. (2007) The media’s failure: A reflection on the Rwanda Genocide. In: A. Thompson (ed.) *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 248–255.
- Editorial (1992a) UN overstretched. *The Sunday Telegraph* 16 August, p. 18.
- Editorial (1992b) Bosnian horrors. *The Times* 7 August, p. 11.
- Eyal, J. (1992) Lessons in Balkan reality. *The Guardian* 13 August, p. 17.
- Fox, R. (1992) Tribal war poses new threat to Europe, *The Daily Telegraph* 11 August, p. 8.
- Gourevitch, P. (2000) *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families*. London: Picador.
- Hartman, G. (2002) *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Healy, M. and Marshall, T. (1994) Rwanda: France sends in troops, *Los Angeles Times* 9 April, p. 15.
- Hodgkin, T. (1957) *Nationalism in Colonial Africa*. New York: New York University Press.
- Johnson-Cartee, K.S. (2005) *News Narratives and News Framing: Constructing Political Reality*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Katz, I. (1994) Horror rises at way-stations to death. *The Guardian* 23 July, p. 13.
- Kershaw, I. (2008) *Hitler, The Germans, and the Final Solution*. London: Yale University Press.
- Kushner, T. (1994) *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: A Social and Cultural History*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lambert, S. (1994) ‘8000’ butchered in Rwanda capital. *The Independent on Sunday* 10 April, p. 1.
- Lewis, A. (1992) Yesterday’s man. *The New York Times* 3 August, p. A19.
- Luce, E. (1994) Killings soar in Rwanda anarchy. *The Guardian* 22 April, p. 20.
- Lume, W. (1994) An African solution to the Rwanda tragedy. *The Guardian* 20 July, p. 23.
- Miller, J. (1992) Death-camp scoop made the world sit up. *The Sunday Times* 9 August, p. 18.
- Moeller, S. (1999) *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*. London: Routledge.
- O’Brien, C. (1992) Only fools step in. *The Times* 6 August, p. 10.



- Parmelee, J. (1994a) Rebels advance in Rwanda, vow to take over capital. *The Washington Post* 12 April, p. 13.
- Parmelee, J. (1994b) Terrorized Rwandans fear what lies ahead after foreigners leave. *The Washington Post* 15 April, p. A7.
- Peterson, S. (1994) 100 000 dead in Rwanda fighting. *The Daily Telegraph* 22 April, p. 14.
- Peterson, S. (2000) *Me Against My Brother: At War in Somalia, Sudan, and Rwanda*. New York: Routledge.
- Prentice, E. (1995) Balkan path to hell is paved with good intentions. *The Times* 20 July, p. 15.
- Randal, J.C. (1994) U.S. airdrops food as Rwandans start to return home. *Washington Post* 25 July: p. A1.
- Reuter (1994) Rwanda appeal. *The Times* 28 April, p. 15.
- Rimer, S. (1995) Bosnian war bewilders a midwestern town. *The New York Times* 24 July, p. A1.
- Sacks, J. (1992) Bosnia and conscience of the world. *The Times* 8 August, p. 11.
- Semelin, J. (2007) *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Shandler, J. (1997) Schindler's discourse: America discusses the Holocaust and Its mediation, from NBC's miniseries to Spielberg's film. In: Y. Loshitzky (ed.) *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, pp. 153–168.
- Silber, L. and Little, A. (1996) *The Death of Yugoslavia*. London: Penguin.
- Smithers, P. (1995) Out of our depth in the Balkans? *The Times* 2 September, p. 17.
- Sofsky, W. (2003) *Violence: Terrorism, Genocide, War*. London: Granta Books.
- Thompson, A. (2007) Introduction. In: A. Thompson (ed.) *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 1–11.
- Todorova, M. (2009) *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford: Oxford University.