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"Apparently Forgotten Wars". (Digital) Genocide, Information and the Construction of the Other in Postmodern Conflicts

Giacomo Buoncompagni
Lumsa University of Rome email: giacomo.buoncompagni@libero.it

Doi: 10.2478/gssfj-2022-0005

Abstract

This paper proposes a problematic reconstruction of the relationship between ethnic conflict, racial hatred, and media, focusing on the analysis of information flows and the social construction of the Other, as a public enemy, in war contexts. Through a socio-historical approach, analyzing sources offered by the press and international literature, we will examine the genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994, where about one million people lost their lives in only 100 days. This case study is still particularly interesting today as an example of a timeless conflict, or rather of a 'forgotten (ethnic) war'
This expression refers to those conflicts that have profoundly marked humanity but have not received enough attention from the mass media. This is often the case for economic reasons, intrinsic to the information economy, as well as cultural issues and, to some extent, also because of the dependence of the media on the agenda dictated by politicians, who often choose to promote conflicts when there are special interests at stake.
Digital technologies have, however, partially limited the effects of this "forgetting." Interconnection and digitization processes can sometimes transform the violent past into public memory, into pieces of shared history, so that the same mistakes are never made again.

Keywords: digital media, Rwanda, ethnic war, journalism, cultural violence, crisis

1. Introduction

The term 'war' generally refers to a particular kind of organized violence.
More precisely, it is primarily a collective phenomenon; it comprises a subjective element, intention, and a political element, organization; it serves the interests of a small political group; and it also has a legal character (Fornari, 1988).
The sociologist Bouthoul (2010) considers war as a form of violence that is essentially methodical and organized in terms of the groups that participate in it and the methods they use. War is limited in time and subject to legal rules, it is always bloody and involves the destruction of human lives and surroundings.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the world has been plagued by numerous conflicts that have profoundly different characteristics from previous wars. For this reason, the classic definition of 'organized violence' is no longer useful for analyzing the new global socio-political scenario.
Numerous scholars have thus proposed new terms such as 'postmodern wars', 'low-intensity wars' or 'new wars' (Kitson, 1971; Duffield 2004). These definitions help to better define and circumscribe some of the precise elements that identify this new type of conflict.
First of all, we are talking about wars that explode far from the West and the centers of global information. They concern areas that are 'peripheral' to the countries of the North, such as Africa or Eastern Europe. This is why they are called the 'wars of the Others', observed from our local 'window', without involving us directly.
The media landscape of the 1990s is constantly evolving to tell the story of wars far away and across borders.
Media corporations with transnational interests emerged, we witnessed the first convergence of electronic media (radio, cinema, and cable TV), and local television and news stations relied more on international agencies such as Visnews or Eurovision (Jeanneney, 2000).
The first CNN office in Atlanta was established in 1980 where news was broadcast twenty-four hours a day, and in the early 1990s direct broadcasting by satellite appeared, making it possible to receive and send live images from all parts of the globe (Briggs, Burke 2010). These technologies mark the birth of the first global television that completely transforms the way conflicts are narrated.
The era of real-time war information begins.
The continuous flow of news and its internationalization give the media greater power to impose their agenda on politicians and institutions, which find themselves acting quickly on the issues raised by journalists. Even the 'new wars' end up undergoing such post-Cold War processes.
The intensification of global economic, cultural, and political-military interconnections gradually creates an increasingly evident erosion of the nation-state, which can no longer manage the changes taking place in time.

2. Change in information, change in conflict

Faced with the weakening of the state authorities and their loss of the monopoly of violence, war is an effective means for the emergence of new systems of power and profit.
According to Duffield (2004, p. 49), postmodern wars represent "innovative and long-term adaptations to globalization", i.e., extreme and rational attempts to manage the wave of globalization and the severe crisis in some regions.

The strong economic crisis and the fragmentation of military power led states to initiate conflicts that are first and foremost "forms of identity politics": they include or exclude (Bauman, 2000; Duffield, 2004).
In previous wars, the identities of the combatants were known (e.g., British vs Germans).
In post-modernity, identity is reconstructed and instrumentalized specifically to pursue specific political projects and achieve power.
Thus, the methods of combat change, the aim is no longer just to win people's consent, but territory and power are achieved through the instruments of hatred and fear, stigmatizing different identities.
The distinction between combatants and civilians becomes more fluid.
The subjects of these conflicts are no longer regular troops, but paramilitary units, mercenaries, criminal gangs that finance themselves through looting, arms trade, or by exploiting humanitarian assistance activities (Kaldor, 1999).
Explaining the complexity of this reality becomes particularly complicated for the international media. On the one hand, the end of grand narratives favors more uncertain and fragmented narratives; on the other, information flows are increasingly centralized and tend to reflect Western interests, perspectives, and values.
The post-Cold War world thus has a center that accepts globalization and secularization and a peripheral world that rejects the new reality and rediscovers recently buried ethnic and tribal hatreds.
The dominant paradigm for interpreting peripheral realities consists in the celebration and rediscovery of differences and diversities: new culturally based racism is born, which can easily explain the instability of some areas of the world (Kaldor, 1999; Collins, 2006).
As a result, international crises were depoliticized and explained based on cultural factors, and the media began to interpret wars as 'ethnic conflicts' and 'complex emergencies' (Allen, Seaton 1999). This interpretation meant, in a way, giving up the effort to understand the political causes behind the clashes, emptying it of all meaning and comparing it to natural disasters.
Therefore, some conflicts appear today as 'forgotten wars'.
This type of media coverage prompts information professionals to look elsewhere, shifting their gaze to issues deemed more topical. If a crisis appears to be endemic because it is generated by tribal hatreds, it cannot be resolved, we can only accept it and observe it from a screen.
However, if political forces decide to act, the intervention is motivated by the humanitarian rhetoric of the media and the spectacle of pain (Kaldor, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006).

During the 1990s, the term 'humanitarian' took on a meaning that no longer concerning respect for human rights but was exclusively associated with humanitarian assistance.
One example, as will be described and analyzed in the following section, concerns the public narrative of the ethnic conflict in Rwanda, which focuses mainly on the presentation of endless queues of refugees, without attempting a coherent political analysis (Ndemesah, 2009).
The spectacularisation of the media is perfectly suited to a comfortable and even reassuring interpretation for the Western audience, whose physical and cultural distance is confirmed by the 'peripheral world'.
By reading wars in an 'ethnic' sense, the intervention strategies of Western countries are elaborated precisely based on the policies of exclusion and inclusion; local leaders and elites are directly involved in the theatres of war and instrumentalize identity divisions for political ends.

3. The case of Rwanda

Awareness of the centrality of the media has been growing since the early years of the last century, when the press was the only means of information, and has changed in recent years. It is from the need for a stronger mediation of the press in social representation that emerges the intellectual work of Walter Lippman (1922) *Public Opinion*.
According to the sociologist, the media, through the construction of stereotypes together with the assumption of behaviors derived from certain narrative-visual forms used by them, help to create pseudo-environments, allowing citizens to know events and topics totally unrelated to their subjective reality.
The media, to paraphrase Lippman, allow us to build a bridge between "the world outside and the image in our minds". And it is in this still effective statement that the cultural (and communicative) conflict in Rwanda takes shape.
What we are witnessing, then, is a 'reduction of complexity', a process of simplification, the activation of mechanisms on which the dominant public discourse is based.
The international media fall into the trap of perpetuating and reinforcing ethnic divisions, which are then activated by propaganda orchestrated on the ground, including through control of the local media. The real manipulation strategy is to construct information from the very place affected by the crisis. This is because the local dimension of the event (and its public narration) is already in itself reliable, compared to the news reported by a foreign newspaper, far from that reality (Guidi, 1993; Parenti, 2000; Buoncompagni, 2021).

The case examined, that of the genocide in Rwanda, is particularly interesting because it has highlighted the interconnection of media, political, local, and international processes over time.
That conflict did not break out suddenly because of tribal hatreds but was the result of several months of propaganda aimed at creating separation, where previously there had been a form of coexistence, albeit a troubled one.
While in the old wars, the mass media were an excellent tool for creating consensus and demonizing the enemy, their action took place in a context where the demarcations and political boundaries were already clear. In the new wars, the role of information is even more important, as it is a necessary flow to extend the criteria of inclusion and exclusion to the whole population, to mobilize it, and create the conditions for conflict (Kaldor,1999; Couldry, 2015).
Once it has been decided who is part of one identity and who is part of the other, these identities have to be made "operational", and the strategy consists in creating a different and hostile "Other".
In this process of construction of otherness and subsequent stigmatization, the media instill a sense of victimization and panic in the population, creating a feeling of being under imminent threat.
As will be described later, in this specific case the most powerful medium was radio, known to the Rwandans as "*ibitega*", a magical tool for acting on someone else at a distance (Carruthers, 2000).
By the early 1990s, apart from the presence of the BBC World Service, the country was almost completely isolated from the international media. In the absence of alternative sources, the radio medium was extremely reliable and effective.
In this context, an anti-Tutsi media campaign was first launched by Radio Rwanda, the country's predominantly Hutu public service, which at the time represented 20% of the Rwandan population. At the same time, Radio Télevision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLMC), in strongly nationalistic tones, invited young people to join the radical racist Hutu party (Coalition pour la défense de la République).
Propaganda in Rwanda played a major role in encouraging Hutus to perceive themselves as ethnically different from Tutsis, portraying the latter as lighter-skinned foreigners of Ethiopian-Nilotic origin who had only recently arrived in their territory (Punier, 1995).
From then on, propaganda followed the "usual" script of previous wars.
The Hutu people were victimized by the centuries-old oppression of the Tutsis and the threat of a return to a feudal regime was emphasized.
The responsibility of the media in the genocide was such that Reporters sans Frontiéres pushed the UN Human Rights Commission to bring journalists and RTMLC supporters to justice (Ndemesah, 2009).

3.1 The limits of global information in the ethnic conflict

On the night of 6-7 April 1994, Radio Télevision Libre des Mille Collines began broadcasting calls to avenge the death of President Habyarimana, a Hutu majority whose plane had been shot down on the morning of the same day.
Within hours, the information disseminated became hysterical incitements to bloodshed, identifying the Tutsis as the public enemy responsible. Still known are the calls to "fill the still empty cemeteries" or to "finish a good job" (Prunier, 1995).
The massacres were carried out with machetes, sticks, and firearms. The number of victims was enormous, an estimated 800,000 Tutsis and 30,000 moderate Hutus died. Roughly 11% of the entire Rwandan population (Carruthers, 2000).
In reality, the extermination was politically planned months before Habyarimana's death, a process of democratization was underway that frightened the Hutu elites close to the regime.
The Rwanda affair illustrates how an 'ethnic' coverage of the conflict can provoke and influence humanitarian intervention, creating indifference or helping to ignore a tragedy taking place across the border.
For political scientist Mel McNulty (1999), the approach of international journalism towards the Great Lakes region suffers and still suffers, from three major flaws.
The first is the presence of what the scholar calls "parachute journalism", characterized by the ignorance of the reporter, who rushes to the scene to narrate the event, without possessing the right cultural tools and local historical knowledge.
The second aspect relates in parallel to more 'nurtured' forms of journalism, based on a greater cultural background, which nevertheless leads news workers to exalt the ethnic nature of the conflict. The final flaw concerns the adoption of a 'secret agenda', narrating the events while being influenced by the interests of other countries involved in the crisis.
The story of Rwanda is a combination of all these three approaches.
With the beginning of the genocide, Western journalists began to flee in haste; about thirty of them were present during the bloodiest phases of the massacres (McNulty, 1999).
On 10 May of that same year, Nelson Mandela was elected in South Africa.
Many journalists and newsrooms, including those in the crisis zone, activated all satellite communications to follow the election of the new president exclusively.
In The Media at War, the philosopher Carruthers (2000, p.226) writes about this:

"When Pierre Gassman, head of media at the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva, asked CNN to cover Rwanda immediately, the response was that even though they knew what was happening, reporting on two African scenarios simultaneously would confuse the American public"

The concept of the 'forgotten war' stems precisely from this way of telling and selecting the story of reality.
The extent of the genocide was not immediately understood, both because of the naivety of culturally unprepared journalism, and because of the cultural and political prejudices that the approach to Africa has long carried.
The massacres were reduced to daily inter-ethnic clashes in which the violence came from both sides.
The only sources Western journalists relied on were NGOs and UN troops, which in turn reinforced this pathological reading of the conflict (Prunier, 1995).
The media, therefore, ended up embracing the vision of the Rwandan regime, the violence was not reported as the result of a specific political choice, but as the consequence of spontaneous anger at the assassination of President Habyarimana.
The inability to communicate and manage this politically led, a few days after the end of the conflict, in May 1994, to tails of hundreds of refugees being herded into Goma, on the coast of Lake Kivu, without food or medicine.
The result was another 3,000 deaths a day from cholera; the news of the humanitarian catastrophe obscured the details and political purpose of the genocide.
There was a narrative of an undifferentiated set of victims, ignoring the fact that among the Hutu refugees hid the organizers-executors of the massacre (Verschave, 1994; McNulty, 1999; Buoncompagni, 2019).
The humanitarian emergency confirmed the ethnic nature of the conflict, the story told by the media was one of suffering and refugees. For McNulty (1999), this confusion allowed for the direct intervention of France; after the genocide, the critical position of the French media fell flat on the government's position and television logic, focusing on the spectacle of the pain.
Public radio and television stations such as France 2-3, France-Info, France-Inter avoided criticizing the regime's forces to leave room for the humanitarian crisis, trying to 'equally' distribute the blame for the affair between Tutsis and Hutus (Verschave, 1994).
The advent of global television and real-time information was supposed to bring unprecedented cosmopolitan awareness. According to the McLuhanian idea of the 'global village', the barriers separating individual nations and interests were to fall.
Global media were to lead to the creation of a single international public opinion, an imagined community based on empathy and not on geographical ties, capable of observing different levels of reality and putting pressure on governments in case of conflict.
However, the Rwandan 'forgotten war' has shown a very different situation.
Even when images documenting a genocide reach people’s home, a public reaction can be characterized by apathy or indifference (Taylor, 1990; Sontag, 2003).

Whether the media choose not to report or inaccurately report a war may depend on many factors.
In the era of satellite television, it is first of all the availability of images that determines whether or not a war can become a 'global crisis", an event recognized as worthy of being translated into a media spectacle (Postman, 1985). The second element concerns the fact that journalists have at their disposal an important variety of visual material and technological tools to transform the event into news (Sontag, 2004).
The third point concerns the psycho-economic effect.
According to Taleb (2004) even when journalists decide to cover an area of conflict that is not normally press-beat, a 'domination syndrome' is triggered. The economic competition between the different newspapers leads news operators to chase each other in order not to lose audience shares.
The media thus continue to obey domestic logic. For an international crisis to receive attention, it is often necessary for politicians to mobilize television and the press.
The media's portrayal of the peripheral, post-Cold War world focuses on the negative aspects; instead of helping to eliminate distinctions, journalism tends to emphasize the differences of the 'others'.
The genocide in Rwanda took place amidst the indifference of the global media, which only arrived in the country when it was all over, focusing on the suffering of the victims and excluding any local political consideration.

4. The genocide and its digitalization

Among the many challenges that a society facing genocide faces is ensuring that the history of the event is documented. The testimonies of witnesses and survivors, victims, and repentant perpetrators, must be recorded and catalogued along with the documentary evidence.
After this initial phase of collecting the "traces" of the traumatic event, a way must be found to make this vital information available to researchers and the public.
In our age, the digital, accelerated, and hyper-connected age, the only practical solution is to properly digitize each trace, so that their integrity is preserved and thus the information can be available and accessible to future generations (Rukesha, 2019).
In Rwanda, the task of "digitizing the genocide" has fallen to the Genocide Archives of Rwanda Genocide Archive (GAR)[11].

[11] GAR: https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php?title=Welcome_to_Genocide_Archive_Rwanda.

A first step regarding the establishment of the Kigali Genocide Memorial in 2004, in the Gisozi district of Kigali. The task was to transform the memorial building into a living museum. It was awarded to Aegis Trust, a British-based non-governmental organization founded in 2000 to work for the prediction, prevention and ultimate elimination of genocide through research, education and the dissemination of information and advice.

The memorial was established by Aegis at the request of the Rwandan government and the Kigali City Council. The memorial continues to be managed today by Aegis on behalf of the Rwandan National Commission for Combating Genocide (Commission Nationale de Lutte contre le Genocide (CNLG).

The collection of materials, with commemorative purposes, included pre-colonial and colonial history, audiovisual testimonies mainly from genocide survivors, historical information (photos and text documents), and hard copies of newspapers published before and during the genocide. The collection of newspapers was intended to illustrate how awareness and propaganda were developed over time by government systems, dating back to the first violence in 1959 and continuing until 1994, when the genocide escalated (Kansteiner, 2014; Zucker, Simon, 2019).

The (digital) documentation strategy the GAR used to collect life stories from different experience groups covered a substantial survey sample such as survivors, rescuers, perpetrators, elders.

As a result of this work, useful processes of preserving testimonial material and building/analyzing useful public and digital channels to provide public access to the study, such as GAR's website, were activated. Interactions with end users, supported by digital technologies, have been fundamental, almost a "psychological cure" because they show how the digital archive has helped users not only in Rwanda, but users all over the world to access "unpublished" materials, understand and remember the massacre and the ethical dimension of journalism.

Even prosecutors around the world have consulted and interacted with the website to take useful information about genocide fugitives. Educators and teachers developed didactics based on the documents obtained from the GAR; the discipline "Peace and Values Education" was introduced into the Rwandan educational curriculum as a cross-curricular theme only recently (Rukesha, 2019; Thompson; 2019). Beyond the public and institutional dimensions of the archiving and digitization process, the psychological aspect has also been important. Exposure to this material can put a strain on those who are digitizing these documents or those who are viewing them.

Digital media "preserves" the past, but at the same time allows the past to resurface in our minds.

GAR therefore is involved in the digitization of this valuable collection.

Evidence of genocide can be studied to provide a lesson for future generations, but that lesson can only be taught if this material is digitized and made available.
Thanks to digital, the experience of Rwanda still goes, even today, far beyond its borders.
The hope is that the world will learn the cost of losing *Ubumuntu* (humanity), and thus create more networks of solidarity and more independent information that can create balanced and comprehensive narratives in the interest of all. Informing also means predicting the social consequences of an event, it means understanding how much a narrative nourishes or harms society (Zucker, Simon, 2019).
Our world is an increasingly "mediated" space.
It is an environment of relationships, of political and social communication, of conflict, and at the same time a space of morality and responsibility.

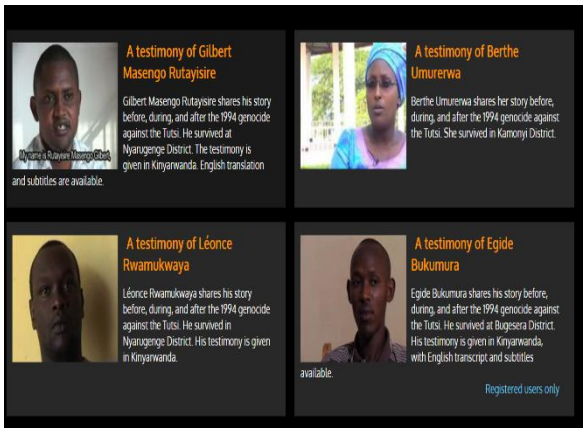

Fig. 1 Photo-video testimonies (example of GAR contents)

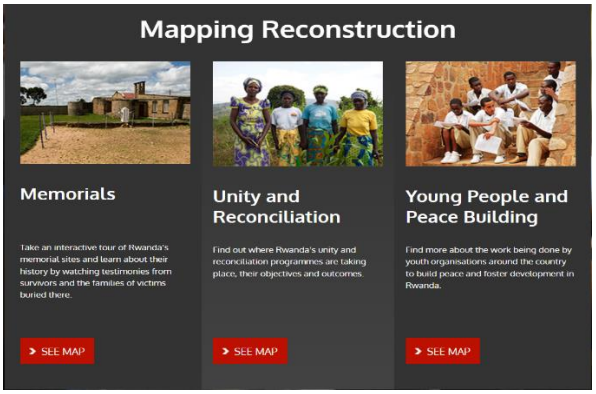

Fig. 2 Mapping Reconstruction (example of GAR contents)

5. Conclusion

War and peace are two dimensions that do not seem to have received the same attention throughout the history of man and communication.
Peace plans generally have a limit, a preventive attitude towards the phenomenon that is believed to have provoked the war, and thus constitute a sort of inventory of the causes of the conflict. The constant presence of an irrational element in the phenomenon of war must be noted.
To arrive at scientific pacifism, and its public narration/representation, it is necessary to arrive at a scientific knowledge of social phenomena.
This is also a fundamental action on the part of journalism.
This concept is largely what Bouthoul (2010) proposes when he states that we are condemned either to prepare for war or to engage in the progress of polemology.
The boundary between war and peace becomes even more blurred when conflict enters the public media sphere.
Even before the clash, we have seen how the media themselves can be used as instruments of propaganda and incitement to hatred, creating the conditions that make recourse to violence possible and conceivable
But the opposite is also true.
This is certainly not the case in Rwanda, but the media can also be used by political actors for 'positive' purposes such as conflict prevention, resolution, and transformation. The globalization of communications has created 'media bridges' that negotiators can use to unlock international crises and mediate between disputants.
This innovative use of the media should be linked to a broad shift in the mechanisms governing international relations in the second half of the 20th century.
The emergence of new diplomacy, more exposed to the gaze of the mass media and public opinion, forced political actors to change techniques and strategies.
The classic propaganda action at the transactional level gives way to a more prudent public (media) diplomacy (Gilboa, 1998). Some political negotiators, starting with Henry Kissinger, use the media to send signals and put pressure on state and non-state actors to restore trust and mobilize public support for agreements.
Making the media a peace-building tool can certainly be a positive step forward, but it can still backfire and cause pathological social effects.
For Dayan and Katz putting a negotiation in the world spotlight can certainly help to build trust, but it inevitably leads to turning that event into a media event, great public ceremonies of mass communication, which keep the public in suspense.
It may therefore happen that the enthusiasm shown by the media leads to the concealment of certain aspects of the background to the conflict (Shinar, 2002).

If in parallel with the confidence pact created, hidden problems emerge regarding the ongoing conflict, this could lead to a greater escalation of violence and the shock could be enormous.
The crisis of expectations for a definitive peace may result in frustration and confusion with extremely negative consequences for a real solution to the war (Shinar, 2002; Hammond, 2007).
The media can reinforce the reconciliation of certain types of conflicts so that they are not forgotten, but concrete political action is still needed to accompany the information, such as the signing by Heads of State of a peace agreement that can put an end to the violence. Journalism should abandon its tendency towards spectacularisation and attempt to recount the long processes that link individual events to their specific historical and cultural context.
In more complex wars, such as the one analyzed in the previous paragraphs, which include cultural and identity factors, information must work in reverse, transforming conflict into understanding, hatred into understanding between peoples, hostility into (media) hospitality.
Almost 30 years ago, Rwanda slipped into the abyss.
Massacres took place in broad daylight, but many institutions 'looked the other way'.
Starting with the media institutions. There is still much to learn, and to remember, about the relationship between global information and genocide, an issue laid bare by the Rwandan tragedy.
The so-called 'hate media' (Thompson, 2019) were the roots of the ethnic conflict, actively encouraging the extermination campaign.
The global media landscape has been transformed since Rwanda.
We are now saturated with social media, generated more often than not by non-journalists.
It is the new publics, within their cultural bubbles and bias, who construct their networks and virtual communities, their "friends" and their "enemies", the "Other with me" and the "Other from me".
Through their own voices of hatred, everyone searches for themselves, their securities, their truths.
Fortunately, the technical nature of the digital and its potential allow us to preserve useful documentation so that collective traumas also retain a dimension of public memory.
Memory is a 'cognitive ritual' useful to communities to keep alive the memory of their loved ones, not of violence, trying to keep track of past mistakes and educating future generations to the good.
To conclude, journalism and international media have failed in the telling of this massacre, forgetting inside newspapers the telling of the truth.
But technologies have recovered a part of the story by making it a public memory.

The Rwandan genocide is an ethnic war only apparently forgotten.

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