

Reply from Linda Melvern to Fergal Keane

Dear Editor,

I thank Fergal Keane for his contribution to the debate about the British media and the coverage of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. I am glad he shares my view that the news desks should have given the story a higher priority.

I am saddened however that he is left with the impression that I was describing “journalistic abandonment” of Rwanda in 1994. The failure instead was to adequately report that genocide was under way. I am of course aware that Mark Doyle and Lindsey Hilsum were in the capital, Kigali, but what little coverage they achieved in the early weeks did not describe the widespread and systematic elimination of the Tutsi. The news that was coming out of Kigali at this time concerned the evacuation of the ex-patriots, the renewed civil war, and “tribal anarchy”, said to be the cause of a lot of killing. In his article Keane refers to a broadcast by Mark Doyle on April 14 in which Doyle states; “what appears to have been a deliberate plan by Hutu militias to massacre Tutsis or rebel supporters”. Deliberate murder is not the same as genocide and in any event the “deliberate murder” mentioned in this news bulletin is lost in a wealth of detail about rebel soldiers taking revenge, the renewed civil war, and the “helpless UN”. I have Doyle’s transcripts.

Doyle has since agreed that the genocide was not understood at this time. “ I was guilty of misinterpreting the situation. I spoke of chaos and indiscriminate killing, but gradually I learned with my own eyes that it was not chaotic, that it was far from indiscriminate”, he said in a conference in Canada in 2003. It is not until April 29 that Doyle employed the word genocide, and only then to tell listeners that this determination had come from Oxfam.

Keane has agreed in the past that the initial press coverage was misleading. In his own book on Rwanda he writes: “The mass of early reporting of the Rwandan killings conveyed the sense that the genocide was the result of some innate inter-ethnic loathing that had erupted into irrational violence”. He writes there was

“compassion without understanding”. I could not agree more. His producer at the time, David Harrison, has written how even in late June when the first documentary-length film on the killings was broadcast by the BBC, “there was no time to discuss whether this was or was not genocide”. No one did an adequate job of making the reality clear, this fact confirmed by eminent journalists including Nik Gowing and Richard Dowden.

I do not single out BBC coverage for this was a news media failure, a failure that has been extensively investigated and proven. Keane is right that I was not in Rwanda during the genocide but this was a political as well as a humanitarian story, and I was at the UN Secretariat in New York trying to find out how UN policy towards Rwanda was being devised in the Security Council. Reporting from Rwanda does not guarantee that you will tell the story of indifference and complicity in western capitals. Furthermore I would like Keane to know that I have never once doubted whether or not the journalists who visited Rwanda at this time were in danger or whether or not they were brave. They certainly were in danger and they were very brave.

Keane does not address my central issue at all, and that is the accuracy of the BBC film *Shooting Dogs*, a film said to be based on “a true story” and on “real events”. I believe that it distorts the truth of the massacre at the school, *Ecole Technique Officielle*. There was no British priest at ETO, no British person stayed with Rwandans at the school when the Belgians withdrew, no white person stayed behind at the school, the BBC was not there with a film crew, the BBC did not call this genocide even in the first crucial weeks let alone in the first few days, the UN peacekeepers were not awash with ammunition, and the people were not killed at the school by a rampaging mob.

The trouble with *Shooting Dogs* is that a whole new generation may now come to believe that what the film portrays is basically true. It gives a particularly misleading impression of the British role in 1994. The film smacks of a form of revisionism and it should stop.

Linda Melvern

"Assessment of the Impact and Influence of the 1996 Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda," prepared in 2004.

The Joint Evaluation was originally published in Copenhagen in 1996 and was a co-operative effort of seventeen governments.

4.61 The Joint Evaluation found that inadequate and inaccurate reporting of the build up to and the initial phases of the genocide by the international media contributed to international indifference and inaction. References to "tribal killings" and "civil war" in sections of the media during the first weeks of the genocide had the effect of reducing pressure on key UN member states to recognize and publicly acknowledge that it was a genocide that was underway. This failure occurred in spite of local media, which became dominated in the early 1990s by a radio station and newspaper whose vitriolic propaganda incited ethnic hatred and violence. The Joint Evaluation recommended (E) that:

"The media, individually and through professional associations, should review their reporting on Rwanda to explain and draw lessons for responsible reporting of future complex emergencies. And they should organize a conference for and by the international media, under sponsorship of an organization such as Reporters sans Frontières, to examine media reporting on Rwanda and draw lessons for responsible reporting on future complex emergencies."

4.63 Some prominent journalists have thought about the mistakes made and the lessons to be learned from coverage of the genocide by themselves and their colleagues (e.g. Dowden 2004). A number of studies have been undertaken both by individuals within the media and by academics (e.g. Minear, Scott and Weiss 1996; Rotberg and Weiss 1996; Gowing 1997, Save the Children/ECHO 1998) The Netherlands Association of Journalists held a seminar on the role of conflict prevention and peace building in 2002 and the Canadian-based Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society (IMPACS) has developed a handbook on Conflict Sensitive Journalism and has projects in selected conflict and post-conflict areas. The Institute for War and Peace Reporting also provides support to journalists reporting on conflicts. Unfortunately, even when taken together such steps do not guarantee that major news organizations would be unlikely to repeat the same mistakes as occurred in Rwanda.^[1]

4.64 To complement such steps schools of journalism need to be providing at least some basic training in international human rights law and conflict prevention and media organizations and professional organizations should encourage greater reflection on their practice as organizations and individuals in such complex and challenging contexts. Some journalists argue that there are simply far too few foreign correspondents and not enough space dedicated to foreign news to provide the space for such measures.^[2] Nevertheless, the media as with other professions should strive to improve its standards, accountability mechanisms and ability to learn from experience, and should be encouraged to do so.

4.65 A discussion of the media's responses to the lessons from Rwanda would not be complete without mention of the very significant technological changes that have occurred since 1994 in newsgathering and transmission. The advent of digital video cameras and their widespread use by private individuals has significantly increased the availability of images from many parts of the world. Journalists can now prepare and send good quality film via the Internet or satellite links. The ability of news organizations to cover events has increased substantially.

4.66 Another development since 1994 has been in the number and availability of analytical sources on a particular area of tension or conflict. In the words of one interlocutor: "Groups like the International Crisis Group (ICG) are invaluable for working journalists (and their editors), who often are generalists by nature and don't have the time to get up to speed on the complexities of any breaking crisis. Briefing papers and websites like those produced by the ICG are easily digestible, and perceived to be relatively free of bias. In 1994, journalists who suddenly found themselves covering Rwanda had few independent sources of information about the country, the background to the crisis and were quick to resort to inappropriate narrative clichés about "ceasefire" and "tribal hatreds".

While improvements in these areas reduce the likelihood that a future genocide will be receive inadequate and poor quality coverage, they do not guarantee improved coverage and quality in all cases. For instance the lack of film images from Darfur during 2003 and early 2004 due to travel restrictions on outsiders imposed by the Government of Sudan appears to have been an important factor contributing to the delayed international response in that case. Also it seems that editors continue to be influenced by their perceptions of what politicians, officials and the public see as "important stories".

[1] Personal communication from Greg Barker.

[2] Personal communication from Linda Melvern.