

Four Habits of International News Reporting

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Introduction

George Gerbner said, “We live in a world erected through the stories we tell.” What I argue in my book *Compassion Fatigue* is that there’s never just one story that can be told. There are conventions that are followed, and following those conventions creates a certain journalistic authority: a narrative of events that presumes to be *the* narrative. Many news stories appear to be natural and unforced. But when comparisons are made, it becomes clear that the choices and frames are not inevitable, and they’re not unproblematic.

Since most of the media assume the public is not interested in international news, there is a perceived need to hype the coverage of “foreign” events to an even greater extent than domestic news. “The Four Horsemen are up and away, with the press corps stumbling along behind,” charged activist Germaine Greer, after a series of debacles in 1994, ranging from ethnic slaughter in Rwanda and Bosnia, famine in the Horn of Africa and an outbreak of flesh-eating bacteria in Britain. “At breakfast and at dinner, we can sharpen our own appetites with a plentiful dose of the pornography of war, genocide, destitution and disease.”

As Greer suggests, much of the media’s coverage of crises relies pre-eminently on four habits: on putting forward a formulaic chronology of events, on employing a sensationalized and exaggerated use of language, on referencing certain metaphors and imagery that resonate with Americans and on emphasizing an American connection.

1. Formulaic Coverage

Americans like to see the world in terms of good guys and bad guys. Identifying one side in a conflict as the men in white hats allows the public to root for them and encourages the public to care about their victory or success. “That’s what a lot of news is about,” said reporter Malcolm Browne of *The New York Times*. “We love to see everything in terms of black and

white, right and wrong, truths versus lies.” By power of suggestion, the media so fix a conception in our minds that we cannot disentangle the stereotyped characterization of a group or person from the facts. So Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic become evil, the doctors from Médecins Sans Frontières are fearless, the thousands of refugees are all victims.

Even the chronology of events can be formulaic. In the case of an assassination, for example, there is a cycle that tidies up a complex event into a neat package of death, mourning and funeral. An assassination story is treated as a short-term crisis, rarely lasting as long as a week — handled in many respects like television’s prime-time dramas where a murder is committed, investigated and resolved all within an hour-long show. President John Kennedy’s assassination is the Ur assassination story for the media; the form of those November days has so entered the culture that it is almost impossible to report on an assassination differently. “The speeding limousine, Lyndon B. Johnson’s swearing-in, and the funeral procession were images of the assassination imbedded in the consciousness of Americans who lived through those long days,” wrote reporter Tom Wicker. It’s not the news itself that dictates the shape of coverage; past accounts of comparable events are a better predictor of the level and tenor of reporting.

For some types of crises — earthquakes and hurricanes, insurrections, famine — there is a virtual template for reporting. In the case of a famine, for example, first, there will be no coverage until people are literally starving to death. Editors want solid, Ethiopian-style hunger stories.

Second, once coverage begins, the causes of and solutions for the famine are simplified. There is a tendency for the media to view a famine as if it were a natural disaster, beyond the control of people. That allows the media to avoid a serious assessment of the factors that created the famine. Instead the media typically distill a famine’s multiple causes into single problems: for example, drought, as during the 1984-85 famine in Ethiopia, or general chaos, as during the 1991-92 famine in Somalia. Simplistic causes suggest and make plausible simplistic solutions — such as the giving of money — and tend to exaggerate the agency of Western aid and to minimize the involvement and efficacy of indigenous efforts. The stories rarely challenge the notion that Western money and technology is the key missing factors in the famine equation; instead they focus on the threats to the correct usage of the foreign aid.

Third, the story of the famine is told in the language of a morality play, with good and evil fighting for ascendancy, and characters fit into the parts of victim, rescuer and villain. Intermediaries — such as humanitarian workers — who are perceived as being above partisan politics or self-interest must be available to “interpret” the ongoing scenario. Victims must be sympathetic — usually women and children — and credible for the American public — not aligned with known terrorist or “extremist” political groups. There is a de facto requirement for “purity of victim status”; only when the victims have been identified as bona fide are they candidates for compassion. The media have few hesitations about using pictures of extremes to emphasize who’s good and who’s bad: juxtaposing a picture of a starving mother and child with an image of men brandishing automatic weapons, say.

And fourth, there must be images — ideally available on a continuous basis. Any cutoff of pictures, whether caused by problems of access or censorship, shortfalls in the media's budget or glitches in the communication technology, risks severing the entire story.

The formulaic coverage of crises, the if-it's-Tuesday-it's-time-to-wrap-this-all-up coverage of assassinations, for example, shoehorns crises into a preordained time slot, ignoring the inevitable slop of a crisis beyond its formulaic moments. Simplifying causes, stereotyping the protagonists, streamlining the chronology results in news becoming a product. And the packaging of news as a product tends to make all events uniform, and ironically tends to make events boringly familiar, causing an audience to turn away, turn the page. The disasters all run together in people's minds because they are all covered in the same way.

2. *Sensationalized Language*

It takes more and more dramatic coverage to elicit the same level of sympathy as the last catastrophe. What is strong today may be weak tomorrow. Yet sensationalized treatment of crises makes Americans feel that only the most extreme situations merit attention. As Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the master player of the American psyche, observed, "Individual psychology cannot, because of human weakness, be attuned for long periods of time to a constant repetition of the highest note in the scale."

Yet in the media, dire portraits are painted through relentless images and emotional language. Unless a disease appears to be out of a Stephen King horror movie — unless it devours your body like the flesh-eating strep bacteria, consumes your brain like mad cow disease or turns your insides to bloody slush like Ebola — it's hardly worth mentioning in print or on air.

As one disaster reporter has noted: "We will *always* gravitate toward the largest kill count.... We will *always* speculate (and sometimes predict) the cosmic consequence." So words and phrases such as "unprecedented," "single worst crisis in the world," "a human tragedy of biblical proportions" and "famine of the century" are written into stories. And dramatic words and phrases become the signature of coverage, such as during the genocide in Rwanda when all the media — newspapers, magazines and television — drenched their stories in quite literally bloody imagery, or during the outbreak of Ebola in Zaire when the media referred to the disease in such over-the-top terms as "the ultimate horror," a "doomsday disease," the "apocalypse bug" and a "biological Satan."

And this trend is not just one followed by the newsmagazines or the more tabloid-esque newspapers. TV's gold standard program "Nightline," for instance, opened one of its programs on Ebola with a clip from the Warner Bros. blockbuster *Outbreak*. As ABC anchor Ted Koppel admitted during his monologue: "We're not above using a couple of movie clips to engage your interest...." In the first segment, reporter John Donvan also used several clips from

the movie as a way of saying that the public was in danger of conflating the fictional with the factual. But what was his contribution toward putting the virus in perspective? He said that “half” of the “virus nightmare was coming true.” He didn’t say which half. Instead he said that “Ebola is, without question, a biological Satan, a serpent of a virus....” He then showed the clip of actor Donald Sutherland’s projection of the *Outbreak* virus destroying the United States within 48 hours. “In the Hollywood version,” said Donovan, “what would happen next is inevitable.” And although he showed two medical experts stating that “the virus is not very transmissible,” Donovan closed his report by speaking to author Richard Preston who said that Ebola, like AIDS, is “attempting...to break into the human species and to spread widely.” As is often done when the media covers crises, Ebola was represented as posing a grave risk, not only to humanity at large, but to Americans specifically.

When the admittedly sensational Ebola is represented in such a sensationalized fashion by the media, other diseases — even those such as measles or malaria that kill thousands and millions every year — pale in comparison. The gauge of news values shifts; stories of more prosaic events are ignored or underreported. Compassion fatigue is a consequence of dwelling on extreme examples. The most invidious compassion fatigue effect is not that people will follow a story and then drop it out of boredom or apathy or overload, but that there will be no story to follow in the first place because the media didn’t think the news was arresting enough to tell.

3. *Analogies, Metaphors and Images*

The media’s use of historical analogies, of metaphors and of imagery can be an extension of their tendency toward sensationalism, but it can also be an attempt through vivid shorthand to replace complexity with a known quantity. Most prosaically, analogies and comparisons can be a way of communicating relevance. “I’m big on comparisons,” said Karen Elliot House, president of Dow Jones International, the parent company of *The Wall Street Journal*. “I think most people want to know are we better or worse than Poland and why.” But more insidiously, a use of metaphors and images can be a calculated attempt to seize an audience’s attention. By that token, Ebola has been compared to AIDS and the assassination of Yitzak Rabin has been compared to the assassination of JFK.

In covering crises, the choice of metaphors often signals a political stance: What does this crisis mean for the United States? During the discussion of what to do about Rwanda, for example, those who demanded US action recollected the Nazis and the Holocaust, and those who counseled minding “our” own business brought up Somalia. Earlier, in describing the situation in Somalia, numerous historical references were made. Somalia was like World War II: “Somalis are in the midst of their own terrible holocaust.” Somalia was like Cambodia: “We can’t stand by and permit endless killing fields.” Somalia was like Lebanon: “The vicious power struggle between rival clan warlords has turned Somalia’s capital into Africa’s Beirut.” And most typically, Somalia could become Vietnam: “How do we distinguish a Vietnam-like quagmire?”

In covering the Bosnian war, reporters used verbal and visual cues and references to the Holocaust, death camps and pogroms, to Hitler, Neville Chamberlain and Munich. To apply these terms to the situation was to make an imperative — and sensational — statement. “Would there have been such a furor over the war in Bosnia” in early August 1992, asked *Newsweek* writer Charles Lane, “if New York *Newsday* had not used the phrase ‘death camps’ in its front-page headline? Maybe not.” Holocaust imagery reverberates for Americans as the extreme benchmark of atrocity. It is, as Lane said, “some of the most loaded imagery in the lexicon of 20th-century politics.”

Comparison of a crisis to the Holocaust is an exercise in moral equivalence; it signals to readers and viewers the scale of deaths in a crisis as well as the intent of the murderers. How better to communicate the urgency of a crisis to an audience than to evoke scenes from Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen? How better to cut through the impenetrable internecine politics of a Bosnia or a Kosovo than by suggesting that the Serbs are the new Nazis and the Muslims are the new Jews? But how better to obscure the chaos and context of a current crisis than by reprising the public’s attitudes to an old crisis — to a Holocaust, to a Vietnam, to AIDS, to the death of JFK.

4. *An American Connection*

Americans are terribly preoccupied with themselves. The American filter in the media’s coverage of international news, the notion of relevance to the United States, is very important. When deciding where or whether to go cover a story, location is a critical factor. How do the media choose which crises to cover? Crises are covered for political, strategic, commercial and historical considerations. But even when foreign editors think that there is news that needs to be covered, where it comes from makes a difference.

With the general cutting of news budgets, the media (television especially) can’t afford to cover all the disasters that occur. So they choose chauvinistically. The media don’t necessarily cover crises on the basis of how many people are involved. “It becomes a question of American involvement,” said Ted Koppel. National security interests and the direct involvement of Americans trump the numbers. “I swear to you,” said *Wall Street Journal* reporter Walt Mossberg, “this applies to all the newspapers, some more, some less. Is it a place Americans know about? Travel to? Have relatives in? Have business in? Is the military going there? You’re not going to get on page one with something about Bangladesh nearly as much as you do with something about some country where your readers have some kind of connection.”

Africa, South America and much of Asia get short shrift in this equation. “Unless Americans are involved in the story,” said a *Chicago Tribune* article about Americans’ lack of interest in foreign coverage, “the level of interest among many readers and most editors ranges from pale to pallid.” But, the article concluded, “Their interest perks up a bit if there are pictures of some major calamity, bloody pictures.... Any foreign story without blood or Americans or both has a

tough time.” (Multiple academic studies have borne out the observation that coverage of the South, especially the developing world, is even more likely to be sensational in nature than coverage of Northern and Western events.)

Coverage of international affairs is often viewed through the lens of “What does this mean for *us*?” The subhead to a *Time* cover story on Rwanda asked, “Are these the wars of the future?” Is this a portent of things to come? Should we be afraid? And the subhead to a *Newsweek* cover story on the Bosnian camps charged that the “Shocking images from battered Bosnia put pressure on Bush to decide what America should do — or can do — to stop the nightmare.” With these headlines the articles became not simple hard-news telling of the events, but commentaries on the meaning of these events for Americans.

Two Case Studies

June-July 1999

Presented below are two studies* of the American media's coverage of international news over the course of three weeks: June 21- June 27, June 28-July 3 and July 4-July 10, 1999. During those three weeks, the war in Kosovo dominated international news coverage. *The New York Times* ran more than 30 front-page stories related to Kosovo during those three weeks; *The Boston Globe* ran nearly 20. Other countries that appeared more than once on the front pages of *The New York Times* were China, Israel and Northern Ireland. Poland, France, England (Wimbledon), South Africa, Honduras (the boy who came to NYC) and the "Arabs" each appeared once. On the front pages of *The Boston Globe*, China never appeared, but Northern Ireland did several times; the *Globe* mentioned Northern Ireland with about the same frequency as the *Times* mentioned Israel. Other countries mentioned on the front pages of the *Globe* were Canada, South Korea, Haiti, Chechnya/Russia and Italy.

STUDY 1: *Innocence Abroad: Images of Children in the American Media*

Introduction

This first study is an inquiry into the media's use of children as standard bearers, children as the epitome of an international crisis: the mutilated Sierra Leone teenager, the crying Afghan orphan, the starving Sudanese toddler, the lead-poisoned Mexican youngster, the Internet-

* **Methodology:** In my research I collected data through Lexis-Nexis from major US newspapers (a category in the Lexis-Nexis databank), the three dominant US newsmagazines (*Time*, *Newsweek* and *US News and World Report*) and the evening network news programs (ABC, CBS, NBC). To supplement that data, and to supplement the text and transcripts with visual images, I also collected the actual copies of two newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe*, and *Time* magazine, and taped one early evening television news program: "NBC Nightly News." With those sources, I assessed the actual copies of the newspapers and the tapes of the broadcasts.

I selected *The New York Times* because of its pre-eminent status among American newspapers and the agenda-setting role it plays for other media. I selected *Time* magazine for corollary reasons. I selected *The Boston Globe* to get a sense of how a metropolitan community frames international news for the hometown audience. I selected "NBC Nightly News" because it was the top-rated evening news program. The data collected through Lexis-Nexis helped me assess the validity of the frames I observed and the analysis I made of the four outlets mentioned.

There are occasions in this report where I refer to the media as if they were a single entity. Of course, they are not. At times there is a uniformity of coverage among the television networks, the magazines and the newspapers. On other occasions the demands of the different kinds of media, as well as the different news managements, mandate extremely different coverage — in both style and content. The impact and importance of that different coverage should be addressed in the larger Global Interdependence Initiative's research efforts.

found Kosovo child. The conclusions from this small study support those from my recent book, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine and Death* (Routledge, 1999), in which I argue that the media's reflexive and simplistic use of children in their telling of the news is part of an increasingly visible trend in American society to place children at the center of those political, civic, even environmental issues considered to be both unsettling and irresolvable.

Americans' attention to crises, their impulse for humanitarian intervention, often rests on their sympathy for and interest in the child victims. Children, especially young children and infants, are unanimously viewed as innocents, incapable of complicity with an adult-engendered political or ethnic or religious or even economic mess. Children have become a moral lever in the media's telling of the news. As a result, the media can use victimized children with impunity to generate sympathy for a particular story or even to merely solicit attention for the media publication or program.

Analysis

With the exception of the news story — later “corrected” — about a 13-year-old Honduran boy who had made a 3,200-mile journey to New York City to find his father, there were no front-page or top-of-the-news international events with children as the de facto central characters during the three week period in June and July. Children were not the chief victims or perpetrators of an international news event during this period (the shooting earlier this spring in Littleton, Colorado, would have been a domestic version of such a news event), nor were international children's issues (such as education or childhood diseases) a focus of attention.¹

But there were many international news stories that focused on children during this period. Overwhelmingly, these used children as “examples” — images of babies and children (typically assumed as up through the pre-teen years) were employed to emphasize or dramatize an international news event or issue. Over the course of the three-week sampling, the international news stories that included children traded on the American public's sympathy for children trapped and victimized by adults and adult agendas. As Katie Woodruff, Lori Dorfman and Liana Winett observed in their paper “Frames on Children and Youth in US Newspapers”: “The innocence and vulnerability of children were used often to heighten irony, instill moral outrage, or intensify a call to action....”² Here's a classic case of the media's use of a child to tell a story:

The horror stays locked in Gentiana Gashi's mind. Her eyes are red-ringed holes in a pinched, exhausted face. She came home safely to Cuska last week, but she is still harrowed by the unspeakable memories of May 14, the day she left. Back then, she stood beside her weeping mother, too terrified to cry out, as she watched the Serbs march her father away with the other men, hands clasped behind his neck. He looked back once, tears streaming down his face. Gentiana's mother wept silently too as she watched her

husband's retreating figure until laughing Serbs herded the women out of the village, elbowing them with sly smirks, singing obscene songs. That night when the women slipped back into Cuska, it was Gentiana who picked through the charred pieces of bodies inside three smoldering houses to find the remains of her father. She used to give him massages, she said. Ten men had died in that house, but when her fingers touched a familiar torso, "I knew his back, so he was my dad."

To save her mother from the hideous sight, Gentiana helped three women gather up the human debris of her father and 34 relatives and neighbors into little bags. They tagged each with a name and buried them in two communal graves. Then all those who had survived fled, some to the hills above the town of Pec, some to Albania, anywhere away from the Serbian brutality.

Gentiana Gashi is 11 years old.

These were the lead three paragraphs of *Time* magazine's June 28 cover story, "Kosovo: The Awful Truth."³

In the telling of international affairs in the three weeks of sampling, the media portrayed children primarily in five ways: children as angels, as martyrs, as victims to be rescued, as torchbearers and as literary crutches.

1. "**Angel**" images are used to blacken the villains, by contrasting their evil or misdeeds with the children's innocence
2. "**Martyr**" images are used in two instances:
 - to emphasize the horror or wrongdoing, by describing the deaths or injuries (physical or psychic) of children — often through the perspective of a parent
 - to verify the horror or wrong-doing of others, through an enumeration of child victims
3. "**Victims To Be Rescued**" images are used in two instances:
 - to provide a reason for the action of adults, for example, a mother fleeing to protect her children
 - to goad outsiders into a response (economic, humanitarian, political, military, etc.)
4. "**Torchbearer**" images are used in two instances:
 - to stand in as a synecdoche for a potentially compromised future, due, for example, to environmental degradation (land mines, pollution, etc.)
 - to stand in as a synecdoche for a future already compromised because of cultural/social/political forces (failures of adults to properly parent or educate youth)
5. "**Literary Crutch**" images are used to fulfill an aesthetic need in the story telling

The following is a more detailed set of examples, culled from the articles and transcripts, to illustrate these five frames.

1. “Angel” images are used to darken the villains, by contrasting their evil or misdeeds with the children’s innocence

In keeping with the media’s proclivity for formula, their simplification of complexity into good-guy bad-guy scenarios, children are used as the ultimate innocents. Sometimes, as in the above example from *Time* magazine, the child is older (although still identifiably a child). For readers and viewers, the impact of having an older child as a foil for evil is that the audience recognizes that the child will carry the scars of that encounter for life — and that the child is old enough to understand that he or she will carry that burden for life (whether that burden is the loss of a parent, the loss of limbs or the loss of peace of mind). Sometimes, however, the innocent child is an infant. In that case the debauchery of the villain is painted most darkly, for what possible threat is a babe in arms, what kind of human is capable of harming the so obviously helpless?

- A “CBS Evening News” story about the fate of those in Pristina Hospital had this voice-over from Barry Petersen: “When the Serbs left, they took not just their medical expertise, but also the hospital supplies.... The innocent are most defenseless here in newborn intensive care. It lacks water, antibiotics, even diapers. Baby Mustafa needs oxygen, another thing this ward doesn’t have.... The war is over, and still the innocents suffer.”⁴
- Since war (mainly in Kosovo, but also in Pakistan) dominated the international news hole during these three weeks, the television news programs and the pages of the press were full of photographic and narrative images of the disconnect between the innocence of children (symbolized by play or toys) and war’s destruction.
- A *New York Times* article on the war in Kashmir began with this lead: “The rains came today to this parched Punjabi village, pelting the shiny black hides of water buffalo and the barefoot boys who joyously stretched out their arms to welcome the drenching coolness. But the gaiety with which the villagers greeted the monsoon contrasted with their grim fatalism about the fighting that has raged for two months between Pakistan and India in Kashmir....”⁵
- A *US News & World Report* story about the Serb and NATO use of dummy targets to fool each other’s forces was illustrated with a photo of “Kosovar Albanian children play[ing] on a Serbian tank destroyed by NATO.”⁶
- The *Time* cover story on “The Crimes of War” included a photo of a shell-shocked young boy, backed by the detritus of destruction and clutching a dented aluminum bowl for food and a bedraggled plastic doll.⁷

2. “Martyr” images are used in two instances:

- To emphasize the horror or wrongdoing, by describing the deaths or injuries (physical or psychic) of children—often through the perspective of a parent.

Death and injury are tragic in almost all cases, but when the victim is a child the tragedy seems especially intense—and perhaps even more so when the parent or other concerned adult can do little to prevent it. The drama is heightened still further when the death or injuries are brutal or prompted by callous and random cruelty, and then, in addition, described graphically. Readers and viewers are prodded to viscerally recoil from the perpetrators.

- ❖ An article from *Newsweek* detailing the reactions of refugees returning to Kosovo included this tale told by a Kosovar Albanian: “Just three nights ago, the Serbs came to my home. ‘Is everyone here?’ they asked. Then they opened fire with automatic weapons. I jumped out the window with my son. The rest of the kids were killed. My brother, his wife and their child as well. My wife is in the hospital. I took the brain of my 12-year-old daughter off the floor.”⁸
- ❖ A *Newsweek* article about “Serb savagery” told this story in its second paragraph: “Shyhrete, 36, tried to hide her 10-month-old nephew Eron under her legs. But the baby cried, and someone fired a clip into him, killing the child and wounding Shyhrete 11 times. Another nephew, 2-year-old Ismet, had been hit in the stomach, and like anyone who’s been gut-shot, he had a sudden, desperate thirst. Water, he called, can you bring me water, Mommy? Firing into the small restaurant from the sidewalk, the Serbs shot him in the head.”⁹
- ❖ Even when the savagery is perpetrated by another child, mention of the parents of those children who were victimized serves not only to emphasize the horror, but to universalize it — for we too have children who are precious, most readers can say, we too would not forgive.
- ❖ The *Newsweek* review of a book written about the Japanese teenager who killed a girl with a hammer and decapitated a boy and displayed his head outside a junior high school disclosed that all royalties for the book are going to pay off damages to the families of the victims. Then the article quoted the father of the 11-year-old child who was beheaded: “[My son] Jun’s soul won’t be saved with this book.... It contains nothing but excuses and evasions full of ‘We didn’t know’ and ‘We didn’t notice.’”¹⁰
- To verify the horror or wrongdoing of others, through an enumeration of child victims.

In the virtual album of twentieth-century horrors, battlefield massacres and genocides are memorably recorded through homely images: the unnamed graves, stretching to the horizon, from the fields of Flanders, the piles of glasses and shoes from the Auschwitz and Bergen-

Belsen death camps, the identification pictures taken of the Cambodians executed at Tuol Sleng. Simple images become iconic. Photographs of faces, lists of names and ages, the flotsam of a once-normal life, all have the power to shock, precisely because of their common-ness, their real-ness. In the words of Ernest Hemingway's World War I veteran Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, "Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates."¹¹

- ❖ *Newsweek*, in a brief story about a massacre that took place on March 26 in Suva Reka, featured the photographs of those who died, including: Majlinks, 16; Altin, 11; Redon, 2; Ismet, 2; and Eron, 10 months.¹²
- ❖ Both NBC on June 23 and ABC on June 24 ran stories on the FBI's gathering of evidence for the war crimes tribunal at one suspected massacre site, Djakovica. In voice-overs of the "crime scene," Pete Williams and Terry Moran detailed who died: "six men killed in one house as their horrified wives and children listen upstairs; 20 more shot or burned in other houses, 12 of them children," and "Twenty people, 19 of them women and children, were shot and their bodies burned in this basement and at an adjacent house."¹³
- ❖ All three network evening news programs (on July 4 and July 5) ran stories that included a mention of a "brand new" discovery by war crimes investigators that "ethnic Albanian children, even infants, were systematically targeted by Serb forces." NBC's Jim Maceda reported that "An Albanian eyewitness says he buried boys and girls ranging from ages four to 12, all shot in the head last March, allegedly by Serb paramilitaries." ABC's Gillian Findlay reported in a voice-over that there were 64 bodies found in the warehouse pictured, "seven of them children. The oldest 10 years, the youngest, just 1." And CBS's Barry Petersen reported that of the 64, the "women and children [were] killed with bullets in the back of the head.... Eight-year-old Dardane and her six-year-old brother Dardan were buried side by side."¹⁴

3. "Victims To Be Rescued" images are used in two instances:

- To provide a reason for the action of adults, for example, a mother fleeing to protect her children

It is unusual to hear a child's voice in a story — either in print or on air. Few children, especially very young children, are articulate enough or have the presence of mind to be interviewed on camera. And journalists who might not hesitate to question an adult about a tragedy are typically loath to pry into a child's experience.

But stories about children often appear in the news in the words of others. Because of the reliance, notably by broadcast media, on personal interviews to carry a story along, mothers and fathers are frequently questioned, and it is not surprising that their children can be a focus of their thoughts during a crisis.

- ❖ Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Paul Watson wrote this lead to a *Los Angeles Times* story about the travails of one Kosovar Albanian: “There were two bullet wounds in her broken shoulder, a dead child in her arms, and still Fatime Kelmendi did not give in to the pain. The lives of three more children were in her hands.” “Because of these kids,” he quoted her saying, “I kept walking. If it was just me, I wouldn’t have moved another step forward. I would have lain down there and died.”¹⁵
- ❖ A story on NBC news about landmine activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Jodie Williams, visiting child patients wounded in landmine explosions also interviewed US Marines detailed to sweep for the mines. When asked why he “face[d] this kind of danger,” one Marine replied, “To me, my main concern is little kids. I got a bunch of little kids myself.”¹⁶
- ❖ A story in *The Boston Globe* on lead pollution in Mexico focused on a local community activist, Dolores Guillen. “One by one during the past year, dozens of children in Guillen’s neighborhood — including her 6- and 13-year-old sons — have been found to have harmful levels of lead in their blood, mostly caused by particles that drifted from the sprawling plant that belongs to Met-Mex Penoles, say government and health authorities here. ‘We’re just a bunch of mothers, not organizers or a political party,’ Guillen said.”¹⁷
- To goad outsiders into a response (economic, humanitarian, political, military, etc.)

Despite the near-deification of the principle of objectivity, increasingly journalists in the field — especially during crises such as Kosovo, Rwanda and Bosnia — have been arguing that accurate reporting demands determining responsibility. “In certain situations, the classic definition of objectivity can mean neutrality,” said CNN correspondent Christiane Amanpour, “and neutrality can mean you are an accomplice to all sorts of evil.... An element of morality has to be woven into these kinds of stories.”¹⁸

When journalists choose to take a stand, they can do so in several ways. They can churn out a passionate book. They can appear as talking heads (if their home institution will let them) to vent their perspective. They can pump out “news analysis” pieces instead of “just-the-facts-ma’am” articles. And they can simply select people to interview or quotes to use that support their own point of view. That last is the most ubiquitous method, and it often sneaks under the bar of scrutiny because of the inherent bias in the selection and ordering of information that goes into *any* story, even the most studiedly balanced one.

- ❖ In an NBC story on the orphans of Kosovo, for example, Jim Maceda spoke to a representative from UNICEF about the systematic mistreatment of the children by Serb hospital staff. “UNICEF and other international organizations believe hundreds of other abandoned children are out there in the killing fields, still inaccessible,” said Maceda in a voice-over. “As Kosovars count their war dead, the toll on life’s most precious is only beginning the search.”¹⁹
- ❖ Journalists can also become a de facto PR arm of the government, especially when an administration is taking a popular stance — and supporting kids is nearly always popular.
- ❖ *The Washington Post*’s article on President Clinton’s visit to the refugee camps ran with this lead: “Visiting a tent city where ten of thousands of Kosovo refugees have been camped for weeks, President Clinton held a young boy on his lap, hugged a sobbing woman and called on the cheering refugees to delay returning to their homeland lest they fall victim to land mines. ‘I don’t want any child hurt; I don’t want anyone else to lose a leg or an arm,’ Clinton said during a tour of the Stenkovic I refugee camp here near the Macedonia-Kosovo border.”²⁰
- ❖ In NBC’s package on the President’s visit to the Kosovo camps, reporter Martin Fletcher spoke to a 13-year-old girl, Saranda, who said on camera (through a translator): “I want to thank Bill Clinton for my freedom.”²¹

4. “Torchbearer” images are used in two instances:

- To stand in as a synecdoche for a potentially compromised future, due, for example, to environmental degradation (land mines, pollution, etc.)
 - ❖ A *Los Angeles Times* story about teaching refugee children about the dangers of landmines quoted one of the instructors: “Instead of teaching pupils about things that will be of importance to their lives, I’m in a situation that I have to teach them about land mines and weapons.” And the article also made a point of saying that the third- and fourth-graders taking the classes were also disturbed about their futures. Reported the article: “Lavdrim Shabani, 10, who was weeping after the lesson: ‘I feel so sad that there are all these things I can’t do because of the Serbs.’”²²
 - ❖ *The Boston Globe*’s front-page story on industrial pollution in Mexico ran with a photo of a clearly disturbed 6-year-old boy who “had more than 80 micrograms of lead per deciliter in his blood.” (According to the story, US health experts say any level over 10 micrograms is unhealthy.)²³

- ❖ And a *Globe* story on the fighting in Kashmir used a photograph of an attractive Kashmiri mother holding her young child — even though the article did not speak about the civilian repercussions of the fighting, mentioning only the military elements of the conflict.²⁴
- To stand in as a synecdoche for a future already compromised because of cultural/social/political forces (failures of adults to properly parent or educate youth)

Children, being children, are typically not held responsible for their actions (although that's an attitude that is changing in the eyes of the courts). Then, who's at fault when one of them runs amok? The youthful male killers from Littleton, Colorado — and from all the other high schools similarly attacked — prompted an outpouring of media stories questioning why the murders happened and examining the parent-child relationships. “How to Spot a Troubled Kid,” *Time* magazine promised helpfully on its May 31st cover. Less helpfully, a *New York Times* front-page special report that ran on June 29 was headlined, “Caring Parents, No Answers, In Columbine Killers’ Past.” The media like to run with current topics, and it was the timing of the April publishing of the tell-all book about the 1997 murders in Japan by the 14-year-old boy that undoubtedly prompted *Newsweek* to run a review of it.

Lest readers not make the connection, *Newsweek* stated it explicitly: “the book has sold nearly half a million copies and has dominated best-seller lists all over the country [Japan]. It has also triggered a Japanese version of the do we really know our kids? hysteria that has swept America since 15 people died in April at Colorado’s Columbine High School.”²⁵

When the media speak about American teenage boys in their stories, the context is typically negative: the boys are in gangs, on drugs or perhaps just “troubled.”²⁶ That perception of teenagers — especially male ones — as threatening can slosh over to foreign teens as well, but in crises where civilians are victims and there are no women or young children, older youths are often chosen — together with the elderly — as those next in line for purity-of-victim status. For example, in a story about a massacre of 40 “fathers and sons” in the town of Velika Krusa, *The Boston Globe* ran a huge low-angle photograph of a skull in a field, with a man walking in the background. The caption read: “Gzpm Duraku walked past the skull of Ramadan Duraku’s 16-year-old son in a field in Velika Krusa, Kosovo. Ramadan and his son were allegedly murdered by Serb forces.”²⁷

The hierarchy of the innocent is roughly: infants, young children up to the age of 12, pregnant women, teenage girls, elderly women, all other women, teenage boys, all other men. Or as *The New York Times* quoted a Scotland Yard war crimes investigator: ““There were 60 bodies, all shot....There were seven children under 12, including a 4-year-old. There were three women, one over 60.””²⁸

5. “Literary Crutch” images are used to fulfill an aesthetic need in the story telling

O. Henry has a lot to answer for. Since most school children can't graduate from high school without reading such classics as "The Last Leaf" or "The Gift of the Magi," generations of would-be writers have grown up yearning to put that same poignant and ironic twist at the end of their efforts. And at the turn of the millennium, there are few topics more suitable for poignant irony than the plight of children.

Time magazine, in the final lines of its Kosovo cover story, told this story: "As his ancient, weathered face streamed with tears last week, Azem Mucaj placed roses on a dried puddle of blood at the entrance to Pec. The 72-year-old Albanian farmer had brought his 14-year-old son Gzim safely down from the hills after two months in hiding from the Serbs, reuniting the family of seven. On Wednesday, Gzim raced joyfully to the main road to cheer the KFOR tanks as they growled by. A car stopped in front of him. Five Serbs in black masks jumped out and, without saying a word, shot Gzim dead."²⁹

Discussion

While the media regularly mentioned children in international stories during the three weeks under study, few articles or television segments addressed children's issues outright. Even those that did (such as articles on Kosovo orphans or the Japanese teenage killer) were components of events and issues of larger and long-standing concern to the public: the war in the Balkans, domestic violence. "It has become a bipartisan habit to turn vexing public problems into child-centered causes whenever possible," wrote Ann Hulbert last year in *The New York Times Book Review*.³⁰

Issues that have become child-centered are at the forefront of American politics and society. And indeed in *The New York Times* during the three weeks under investigation there were numerous front-page stories that related to American children — from above-the-fold stories on families with children on welfare and the dentist problems faced by poor children with bad teeth, to below-the-fold articles on coaching Little Leaguers, the unveiling of Julius Erving as the father of tennis phenom Alexandra Stevenson and a stand-alone photo of candidate George W. Bush kissing a toddler.

Seen in that context, the media's employment of victimized foreign babies, toddlers or pre-teens as poster children for international events is just one more example of a general cultural trend.

A 1992 study published in the prestigious academic journal *Journalism Quarterly* investigated relief groups use of photographs in their fund-raising efforts and noted that children were the most credible "message sources."³¹ Both nongovernmental organizations and the media know that the ultimate heart-tugger is a story or photograph of a child in distress. For certain genres of crisis, such as famines, images of children are used reflexively; they are so overwhelmingly the norm of coverage that few other ways of representing the crisis are considered.

Too often the media tread too familiar and formulaic paths in their telling of the news; the media's coverage of international affairs often does an injustice to those they purport to cover. Both print and broadcast media institutions (if not the reporters and camera operators out in the field) too rarely have the values of global understanding at heart. In an industry driven more by the profit motive than by a commitment to public service, provoking an audience has too often become the point of coverage. Does a story have sizzle? Can it capture an audience's interest? Does it deal with a topic that will stir the emotions? If the answer is yes, coverage is likely. As Marc Charney, international editor of the "Week in Review" section of *The New York Times*, told me this spring, "What I'm looking for, what's new in stories on international affairs, are those on women and children — like the piece we did on rape as a weapon of war or the one on child soldiers."³²

Summary

In the case of Kosovo, the lives of children are integrally intertwined with the conflict and its denouement. It is seemingly natural and unforced for the media to dwell on their traumas and experiences. But it is not inevitable that the coverage do so — or do so in the particular manner that it did.

One challenge to be taken up from this research is to consider the media effects of a child-centered focus — and the media effects if other frames are applied. The cumulative effect of the Kosovo frames mentioned above is to leave the impression in the American audience that this was a war in which children were particularly at risk, made particular targets. Another frame, of heroic defenders (a typical frame during World War II), would leave Americans with a different impression. And a third frame, of technological innovation (a frame prevalent during the Gulf War), would suggest a third impression.

In those instances when there is no obvious or natural connection between a verbal or visual image of children and the focus of a news item — such as a photograph of a child playing, when the point of the article is military — a child frame can be distracting at best. Since most readers of even such elite news outlets as *The New York Times* spend mere seconds perusing the front page of the paper, it can be assumed that most readers (and probably most TV watchers, as well) are doing little more than looking at the pictures.³³ Therefore, an article that used a picture of a child when children bore little relation to the topic of the piece was bound to be misrepresented in the reader's mind. Readers of *The Boston Globe* piece about Pakistan, for instance, would be justified in believing that children were a key component of the conflict in Kashmir. (They might also be seduced into believing that the field of battle in Kashmir was a flat, hot Punjabi landscape, rather than a frigid Himalayan one.)

Woodruff, Dorfman and Winett said in their paper that the media's use of images of children reflects "a cynical approach to children and youth. Children appear valuable only to the extent

that they can get attention for and justify a wide range of public policies — some quite remote from the daily lives of the children....Children are used to raise sympathy for issues that have relatively little to do with them....”³⁴ The reflexive use and increasing strength of the convention of using children to illustrate any news story drains the impact of using children as a frame when it is more appropriate, when, in other words, children *are* the story.

STUDY 2: *A Rights Language: Human Rights in the American Media*

Analysis

The American media often attract individuals who champion the public's right to know, who believe that the unfettered communication of information is imperative to the exercise of good citizenship. These individuals believe that the primary role of the media is to check the tyranny of authority. However, the gatekeepers within the media — the editors, producers and certainly the owners — cannot afford to lose sight of bottom-line considerations. Will the telling of a human rights story appeal to readers or viewers? For if those readers and viewers are turned off and go away, the media lose both circulation and advertisers.

Most human rights stories (like most international news in general) don't cross the media's threshold for coverage. Either the story is from a country or region too remote or of too little interest (sub-Saharan Africa, for instance) so that editors and producers don't feel that they need to chance their audiences turning the page or flipping the channel, or the situation is potentially so distressing, but seems so immune to amelioration (such as Tibet or Algeria), that the gatekeepers judge that the public will feel both drained and helpless — emotions no savvy editor or producer wants to provoke.

Still, there may be a slot for certain kinds of human rights stories — such as those told in the aftermath of a major conflict, such as Kosovo. Faced with finite amounts of space and time, print and broadcast media prioritize stories and elements of stories that are dramatic, violent and visual. If a story is sufficiently compelling, sufficiently unusual, sufficiently tied to the political, cultural or economic interests of an audience, the media will feature it. Just as the yellow journals of a century ago fought for circulation through the commissioning of crusading stories about life in the tenements, so too can hard-hitting stories about human rights abuses serve both to forward a humanitarian agenda and to seize the attention (and dollars) of readers and viewers.

The three weeks of coverage analyzed here suggest that “human rights” is not a frame uniformly used in the coverage of international affairs — certain kinds of human rights abuses and stories are prioritized and abuses from certain countries (such as Kosovo), regions, religious or ethnic groups “objectively” receive more attention than others. The three weeks under particular scrutiny in this study, from June 21 to July 10, for example, coincided with the end of the offensive military engagement in Kosovo. It is not surprising, therefore, in the immediate aftermath of such a contentious conflict, that there were a plethora of stories related to human rights in Kosovo and a relative dearth of news — much less human-rights frames — from other countries.

This three-week sampling of print and broadcast stories suggests that human rights and humanitarian frames appear in three types of international stories:

1. News stories in which either a discrete event is described (for example, the release of secret US documents on the human rights abuses by the Chilean military under General Pinochet) or a process is discussed (for instance, the diplomatic deliberation over the possibility of humanitarian reparations to Serbia);
2. Editorials and/or opinion pieces (usually) that debate philosophical points or public policy questions relating to the concept of humanitarian intervention, the definition of a “just war,” the ascribing of blame for war crimes and atrocities or the apportioning of legal versus moral responsibility; and
3. News stories or feature articles that use a description of a human rights abuse to provide evidence for the charge of war crimes, to draw in readers or viewers with a human interest story, to validate the enemy as “evil” or to set a tone of pathetic fallacy.

The following is a more detailed description of these types of stories.

1. News Stories: discrete events and processes

Harvard Professor Joseph Nye wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that “foreign policy involves trying to accomplish varied objectives in a complex and recalcitrant world. This entails trade-offs. A human rights policy is not itself a foreign policy; it is an important part of a foreign policy.”³⁵

Human rights is just one among many considerations in the drafting and implementation of public policy. Clothing international action in benevolent purpose is a given (to confirm this, think of the rallying cries for war: “the war to end all wars,” “the war to liberate Kuwait”), but the triggering elements for action are not typically human rights abuses, but traditional security and economic considerations. Only on those occasions when it is judged that there is relatively little risk are decisions made to take action on human rights grounds. American troops were not sent into Rwanda to stop the genocide, for instance — the Pentagon viewed that as a Vietnam-like quagmire — but the troops were committed for a short-term “humanitarian” mission (after the 100 days of genocide) to aid those in the refugee camps across the border.

As Nye recognized in the passage above, the Clinton administration has human rights objectives in its arsenal of foreign policy interests, and, on occasion, it has opted to exercise those objectives. Over the course of the three weeks of this study, Washington (as well as other governmental and nongovernmental organizations — such as the UN and international NGOs) precipitated various events and processes that were of direct human rights concern — and certain of these events and processes made it into the news.

Yet, with few exceptions (all related to the conflict in Kosovo), the stories that addressed specific human rights issues during this time frame were not fronted in the newspapers and in most cases they didn’t even make it into the newsmagazines or the network evening news programs. These stories included such news items as: the UN’s capitulation in sending a team

to Baghdad to dismantle a laboratory without the technical experts from the special commission charged with disarming Iraq of weapons of mass destruction; the World Bank's approval of a \$160 million loan to China to resettle 58,000 non-Tibetan Chinese to Tibet; and the UN's discreditation of the status of Christian Solidarity International, an organization best known for proving the existence of slavery in Sudan by buying 1,000 people and then setting them free, because of its relationship with Sudanese resistance leader John Garang.

In these and other stories that centered on human rights topics, the relevance and ramifications of the human rights component were almost never discussed. In other words, an event or act would be mentioned but the larger meaning of the human rights component would not. The event or act would typically be treated simply in a "who-what-where-when" fashion. The omission of context and background meant that most readers would not be able to recognize a larger, global pattern of human rights abuses or of human rights-driven policy.

An exception to that was a story in *The New York Times* which began with the following lead: "The CIA and other Government agencies had detailed reports of wide-spread human rights abuses by the Chilean military, including the killings and torture of leftist dissidents, almost immediately after a 1973 right-wing coup that the United States supported, according to once-secret Government documents released today."³⁶

More typical were the following stories:

- ❖ A *Los Angeles Times* article which, in the context of speaking about the missing in Kosovo, mentioned — but didn't follow up on — this important detail: "But negotiators who made the peace deal with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic failed to include a clause guaranteeing the International Committee of the Red Cross access to all prisons to ensure that Kosovo Albanians didn't disappear into Serbian jails. The Red Cross is now talking with officials in Belgrade, the Serbian and Yugoslav capital, and hopes to get permission soon to help search for missing people who may be in prison, agency spokesman Urs Boegli said over the weekend in Pristina, Kosovo's capital."³⁷
- ❖ A *New York Times* piece about UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's urge to UN members to pledge "additional money and personnel to help secure and assist a democratic, multiethnic Kosovo" — yet that didn't expand on the comment in its lead that this "urgent" request was in response to the need to "reintegrate refugees flooding back into Kosovo" or the comment near the end of the article that "the ministers had disagreed over what constituted 'humanitarian' assistance."³⁸
- ❖ A *Washington Post* article quoted the commander of the 7,000-member US peacekeeping force in eastern Kosovo as saying: "We're involved in peace enforcement. If you look where we're engaged around the world, that's what we're doing." But the article then didn't take the commander's advice and look at the US

forces in Kosovo in the context of “peace enforcement” in other US military operations.³⁹

- ❖ The lead four-page story in *Time* magazine’s World section on the NATO occupation of Kosovo did not once use the words “humanitarian” or “human rights.” The closest it came was when it said, “The US may not be able to wipe trouble off the map, the thinking goes, but it can contain it, as it has done in Iraq and now Serbia. Yet the tendency of the US to fight low-intensity wars that stop short of winning unconditional surrender — and that leave tyrants like Saddam Hussein and Milosevic in power — has inspired public doubts.”⁴⁰

2. Editorial and/or Opinion Pieces: philosophical points and public policy questions

During the three weeks of the sampling, editorial and opinion writers reveled in the opportunity to indulge in philosophical debates that actually had public policy ramifications. Reporters too took notice of the swirling public opinion about humanitarian interventions, but, mindful of the constraints of the news-story format, indulged themselves only insofar as they could quote sources musing about the definition of a “just war,” the ascribing of blame for war crimes and atrocities or the apportioning of legal versus moral responsibility for the horrors.

Whereas news stories that touched on topics directly bearing on human rights or humanitarian issues rarely mentioned that the topics *were* in the constellation of human rights or humanitarianism (leaving readers and viewers to intuit that articles about policies towards weapons of mass destruction or reparations were key components of a *human rights* policy), articles that focused on the philosophical debates clearly discussed the relationships among questions of justice, criminal behavior, moral and legal responsibility and human rights.

Most media institutions seized the opportunity to pontificate on theories of justice when President Clinton and Secretary of State Albright gave them the opening to do so. Columnists and editorial writers thrill to discover new unifying theories, and Clinton’s words to the NATO troops in Macedonia gave them the opening to identify a “Clinton Doctrine”: “We must win the peace. If we can do this here...we can then say to the people of the world, ‘Whether you live in Africa or Central Europe or any other place, if somebody comes after innocent civilians and tries to kill them en masse because of their race, their ethnic background or their religion and it is within our power to stop it, we will stop it.’”

- As *Time* magazine had it: “For both President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the war in Kosovo has been as much about morals as it has been about geopolitics.... For Clinton it may also be the war that allows him to establish a foreign policy for the 21st century.”⁴¹

- And as identified by columnist Jim Hoagland in *The Washington Post*: “A Clinton Doctrine of humanitarian warfare is taking shape. Its elaboration by Clinton at Aviano air base, to Kosovo refugees in Macedonia and in a CNN interview on the same European trip cannot be dismissed as mere rhetoric. Words like these will have effect whatever Clinton’s own ultimate use and view of them.”⁴²

Lengthy editorials in the major papers revisited and found justified the earlier spin-doctored pronouncements by Czech Republic President Vaclav Havel and British Prime Minister Tony Blair. “This is probably the first war that has not been waged in the name of national interests but rather in the name of principles and values,” Havel had said. And Blair had equally affirmed: “This is a just war, based not on any territorial ambitions but on values.”⁴³

- Editor-in-Chief Mortimer Zuckerman wrote in an editorial in *US News & World Report*: “Let us all take a moment to celebrate the end and outcome in Kosovo.... We fought not for territory but for values and moral principles.... NATO was right to fight the war, not wrong.”⁴⁴
- And in a *Newsweek* article titled “The Lessons of a ‘War of Values,’” Michael Elliott wrote: “Kosovar lives would have been saved if, in the first days of the war, NATO had bombed Serbia as hard as it later did, while massing troops in preparation for an all-out invasion. Humanitarian wars, it seems, must be waged by blitzkrieg.... Some wars are necessary; some wars are just. No war is good.”⁴⁵

The end of the air war, the movement of NATO forces into Kosovo and the concomitant disarming of the Serbian and KLA troops gave editorial and opinion writers an opportunity to muse on the World War II-era question of who’s to blame in a war where mass atrocities have been committed: the state (and its leader Milosevic) or the individual perpetrators?

- An editorial in *The Washington Post* observed, “the war in Kosovo wasn’t really the work of one man. Saying that Serbia needs to unseat Mr. Milosevic is shorthand for saying that Serbs need at least to begin to come to terms with the terrible things their armed forces and paramilitaries have done in this decade, to the approval or silence of most of them.”⁴⁶
- An editorial in *The New York Times* ended with a similar comment: “What is perhaps most sobering about the scale of the atrocities is that even as their countrymen were killing many thousands of innocents, the vast majority of Serbs chose not to notice, or not to care.”⁴⁷
- And the Kosovo cover story in *Time* magazine mused, “We are faced once again this century with the tasks of assigning individual blame for horrors committed in the name of national policy, and determining how best to bring the guilty to justice.”⁴⁸

Such discussions often paralleled related considerations of Milosevic's indictment for war crimes. "It's clear the Serb leader is morally complicit in the horror of Kosovo," headlined one *Newsweek* article. "Now prosecutors must establish his criminal guilt." This topic is what connected the editorial and opinion pieces to the news stories. Towards the end of the conflict in Kosovo, the media was devoting substantial attention to the alleged Serbian war crimes. Opinion pieces riffed on the definition of "war crimes" and the challenge of establishing "criminal guilt," while the news stories detailed the evidence gathered by the war-crimes investigators.

- Stuart Taylor's column in *Newsweek*, for example, noted: "While prosecutors can probably produce at least circumstantial proof that the Serb leader ordered ethnic cleansing, the worst Serb crimes — the massacres of Kosovar civilians — may well have been blessed only by winks and nods from Belgrade."⁴⁹

3. News Stories and Feature Articles: evidence, human-interest stories, validation and pathetic fallacy

The majority of articles that wrestled with issues of human rights during the three weeks under analysis detailed the allegations of Serbian war crimes. Even stories in which the focus was on ancillary topics — the American Marines, Russian troops, efforts to topple Milosevic, for instance — frequently indulged in scene-setting paragraphs of graphic description. And those stories written specifically to tell of the war-crimes investigations wallowed in the telling of horror. It usually wasn't sufficient in the estimation of the editors to tell of just one incident or to briefly describe a single atrocity — more likely numerous alleged war crimes were described throughout a piece, or if only one incident was discussed, it was discussed in extensive detail.

These war-crime articles that appeared in such numbers actually fulfilled several purposes:

- Some articles served primarily to document the graphic evidence being collected by the war crimes investigators. *Time* magazine wrote: "Everyone has a tale of brutality to tell. The stories numb with their awful sameness. Yet as individual tales multiply, they form the shameful mosaic of a season of slaughter that spread across all Kosovo. The evidence before our own eyes is damning."⁵⁰ And the lead of an editorial in *The New York Times* equally admitted: "During the NATO bombing of Kosovo, when Serbia controlled reporters' access to the region, journalists could document atrocities only by interviewing the ethnic Albanians who had fled to refugee camps. News reports of their accounts usually carried the words 'could not be independently confirmed.' They can be now. Journalists have fanned out through Kosovo, and the confirmation is horrifying. Ethnic Albanians offer reporters crumpled lists of the dead and lead them to burned mosques, the remains of bodies and fresh graves dug by friends and family to bury the victims."⁵¹

- Some articles served a human-interest function — they attempted to draw readers into the Kosovo story, they attempted to describe, for instance, how neighbors could turn into killers. A *Boston Globe* article headlined “Kosovar Sees Friend Lead Raid on Her Village” explained, “Sali Seremeti, 46, was once a close friend of Svetkovic. But on the morning of March 25, he was not surprised when Svetkovic banged on his door with the butt of a rifle and told the family to leave their house. ‘He had gone mad. He changed into something very ugly,’ said Seremeti. ‘We all watched it happen.’”⁵²
- Some articles and television packages describing the crimes of war were simply intended to prove the existence of “evil” — a necessary proof for those journalists committed to finding that NATO was the protagonist in a just war. NBC’s Jim Maceda spoke of the “evil reality of the war in Kosovo and alleged Serb atrocities.” And Debbie Howlett wrote in *USA Today*, “The village reeks of death. Rotted animal carcasses litter the roads, and at least 47 fresh graves have been dug in cemeteries, barnyards and overgrown hillsides. No house is unscathed. Most are burned to a pile of brick, ash and charred timber.... But the destruction of Velika Krusa was not just part of some faceless military effort to wipe out a rebel stronghold or silence government opposition. It was, in the end, the very essence of what is so horrifying about this latest war in the Balkans. It was, as villager Eqrem Hoti says, ‘Inhuman in a way I do not understand.’”⁵³
- And finally for some reporters the war crimes played a novelistic role — à la Edgar Allen Poe. The landscape was made to parallel the blighted lives in Kosovo. A lead from *The Washington Post*: “From the hill above this western Kosovo village, the countryside is a carpet of farmers’ fields, alternating green and black. But venture down the rocky slope, past the Yugoslav army ambulance crumpled by a land mine, beyond the fire-bleached car frames in which villagers say people were burned alive, and the reality of this region comes into focus. In place after place down the hillside, the nubbly black earth has assumed the oblong shape of graves.”⁵⁴ And this lead from a *Los Angeles Times* article: “Call it the highway of hell.... In each house, the refugees find evidence that is impossible to ignore. There is a living room dominated by a pile of ashes in the shape of a body, marking the spot where a man was rolled in blankets, doused with gasoline and burned alive.... There is a house the Serbs apparently used as a chamber of rape. The refugees who returned to this home a few days ago found dozens of buttons ripped from clothes alongside bloodied blankets and women’s underwear.... There is a still-ticking black quartz watch next to a sleeve sticking out of a mass grave. Witnesses say the watch was once on a hand that has been eaten by animals.”⁵⁵

Discussion

“Human rights” is a seemingly transparent concept. As a phrase it is widely employed — so widely, in fact, that many who use the term are entirely convinced that such ubiquity argues a

broad understanding and acceptance of its meaning. Yet I have found, both in my research on the three weeks of “data” and in my previous work, that there is no consistency of message. Those who speak of human rights do not necessarily prioritize human rights in the same manner as others, nor do they even define “human rights” in the same terms. And the distinctions in definition have ramifications beyond the linguistic and rhetorical. As Professor Steve Commins, an analyst at the World Bank, has noted: “Language and definitions are important. Indeed, the smokescreen of some human rights phrases is part of the problem in this field.”⁵⁶

In origin, human rights abuses are internal to a country. But they are international in their repercussions. Human rights have been one wedge by which the international community — or even single nations or international organizations — have penetrated countries. As witnessed in the stories from Kosovo, there has been a growing clamor in the past decade that human rights offenders are brought to justice and their crimes revealed — a clamor backed by the oft-expressed but rarely hearkened-to cry of “Never Again!”⁵⁷

When political and military actions seem warranted, as in the case of Kosovo, governments are perfectly happy to play the human rights card and the media often go along. What seems to be the case is that human rights abuses are referenced by governments when they believe their actions need moral validation, and are neglected by those same governments when it seems politically, militarily or economically expedient to do so. Since most consumers still get their news from the traditional news media, governments have learned to spin their policies through the feeding and leaking of information, the careful choice of information to hand out and the careful choice of language with which to frame that information. “Spin” has become a reflexive part of any government operation.

The Global Interdependence Initiative may be able to help expose the wizard behind the curtain — the media strategies used by government officials. If so, perhaps the Initiative can, like the movie “Wag the Dog,” result in the government at least having to defend itself against charges of manipulating Americans. Greater transparency in government action may result. A more savvy, educated public may be the beneficiary.

Summary

During the three weeks of media sampling, human rights issues came to the public’s attention framed by reference to certain terms:

1. “universal justice,” “just war”
2. “humanitarian war,” “war for moral principles,” “war of values”
3. “war crimes,” including: “atrocities,” “torture,” “disappeared,” “ethnic cleansing,” “mass expulsion,” “massacres,” “genocide”— as well as less uniquely human rights-related words such as “killings,” “murder,” “execution,” “slaughter,” “rape” and “evil”

4. “moral complicity,” “moral responsibility,” “individual blame”
5. “criminal guilt,” “legal evidence”

The media have seized on these news frames precisely because they form our ideals of both the desirable and undesirable flip sides of human rights. We want universal justice. Moral principles demand we rescue the innocent. Moral principles demand we indict the perpetrators of evil. Human rights is NOT just another media frame. Its values, its language go to the essence of who we believe we are, who we hope we will be.

But ultimately, of course, human rights *is* just another frame — one that can be summarily pre-empted when a more compelling or sensational series of events or story line interrupts, one that is inevitably pre-empted when the media institutions judge that the story — or the public’s interest — has run its course. The mainstream media do not privilege reports with human rights frames. Human rights stories may illuminate the very core of what distinguishes us — or should distinguish us — from the brute beasts, but in the business of the media the timeliness and novelty of the stories degrade until finally all that is left is to wrap fish in them.

Conclusion

As a media critic, a media historian and a former reporter, I would counsel those who seek to increase the American media’s coverage of global issues not to be naive about changing these tendencies or even trying to change most of the frames specified in the previous sections on children and human rights. The frames that are in play have been long entrenched. They are not likely to change. But they can be exploited.

The challenge for the Global Interdependence Initiative is to qualify and channel the cascading “big stories” of war, famine, pestilence and human misery that are the daily diet of our information flow. We don’t have to remain captive to crisis coverage. Crises may grossly simplify the world, but for our purposes they may be the Trojan Horse that we can use to educate the public about real needs around the globe.

When a crisis erupts and reporters parachute in to cover it, those groups interested in forwarding an agenda of global cooperation should not solely evaluate the agenda’s success on the basis of column inches devoted to the foreign event or on the basis of the amount of money donated to relief organizations. The type of coverage that reflexively opens individual pocketbooks can actually thwart understanding of global problems and undermine the long-term goals of international organizations.

For example, early hero-victim narratives can work to bring in the dollars. Médecins Sans Frontières found that out during the cholera epidemic in Rwanda when, shortly after one of their physicians appeared on a network news program, a bartender in Alaska called the organization

to say that his patrons had just collected \$9,000 for the doctors. And Elizabeth Dole, when she was president of the American Red Cross, said that the first week of television coverage of Red Cross workers ministering to the victims of Hurricane Mitch prompted 92,000 people to call to pledge donations.

The problem is that although such hero-victim portrayals are effective for short-term fund-raisers, such public-relations efforts can miseducate Americans about world affairs — hindering in several ways the long-term work of those interested in promoting global cooperation.

First, such fables simplify what is often a complex emergency. As a result, the public comes to believe in simple solutions: Feed the children, for example, and the crisis will end. Then, when the crisis doesn't end or another occurs, there is a sense of betrayal, an unwillingness to keep giving and a drift towards compassion fatigue. There's a "been there, done that" mentality about it. "Every time there's a famine in Africa," said a CARE official in Nairobi, "you can always count on somebody asking, 'Hey, didn't they just do that last year?'"

Second, the fable lumps the local population into a homogenous, voiceless class of victims, and ignores the good works of the indigenous aid workers. In Somalia, for example, story after story emphasized who was who. The "heroes," said one commentator on CNN, are the "ICRC, The Red Cross, The Children's Fund, Save the Children. Folks have been there making sacrificial donations of human flesh and blood."⁵⁸ In most of the stories there was no explicit acknowledgment that it was the Somali workers who were making the greatest flesh-and-blood sacrifice.

Third, the audience watching and reading at home is directed to care more about the stereotyped heroes and victims than it does about the crisis itself. "The victim and his rescuer have become one of the totems of our age," wrote the former head of Médecins Sans Frontières, Rony Brauman. "The humanitarian volunteer, a new, newsworthy figure, neither statesman nor guerrilla, but half-amateur and half-expert," said Brauman, has become the "front man" for crises. The result is that the public retains no long-term interest in the country or region in distress. Once the resolution of the individual narrative has been told — the doctor saved the baby, the baby died despite the doctor's efforts — the public's attention moves on. And if there is an attempt to retain that attention by retelling and retelling the horror stories, sooner or later — and increasingly it is sooner — the public turns the page, turns away, slipping into a compassion fatigue funk.

And fourth, reliance on such hero-victim narratives helps undermine Americans paying attention to disasters that can't easily be fit into such storybook constraints — either because there is no Western heroic presence or because the victims are perceived more as villains, complicit in their own demise. The Kurds, for example, who were ignored during the Anfal of 1988 when perhaps as many as 180,000 died at the hand of Saddam Hussein's forces, were caught up in a war between two unloved countries: Iran and Iraq. And there was little donor response to the news of the Rwandan genocide that was described by the *Los Angeles Times* as "just the latest

round of mass murder by the Hutu and Tutsi tribes.” Knight-Ridder conducted interviews with officials from 10 US-based relief agencies with operations in Rwanda and found that “donations have skyrocketed since the focus of the disaster switched from civil war and genocide to the plight of stranded refugees and children suffering from disease and starvation.”

So ironically, more ink or more airtime may not necessarily help Americans to a more nuanced sense of the world or help them come to a greater understanding of what should be their role in it. There is a need for charity leaders, for example, to encourage media coverage that will lead to long-term support — not simply (or even primarily) of the charity organizations themselves, but of the values and principles of what has been called “global cooperation” and “social stewardship.”

And while NGOs cannot be expected to turn their backs on the immediate crisis coverage that accounts for such a large bulk of their funding, what they need to do is engage in a second layer of effort to educate journalists about context and to steer the media away from their lapses into easy black-white characterizations. How can they do this?

Little, perhaps, can be done during the initial rush to coverage, but there remains an opportunity for what Hollywood calls the “back story.” The more responsible broadcasters, such as CNN, the BBC and even Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., are all in the 24-hour-a-day news business and desperately need and want new angles for their aging stories. And *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and their counterparts around the world also have the means and the inclination to stick around — if their reporters in the field can make a compelling case that there is still a news story to be covered. As disasters multiply and compassion runs thin, it only becomes more important to distinguish among crises.

This then is the opportunity for NGOs and others. To advance the cause of global cooperation, the aid organizations together with other internationally oriented groups need to think like foreign editors. What is the second- and third-week angle on the crisis? What are the questions and frustrations in the minds of Americans pummeled by images but bereft of context and information? How can the frames of “innocent” babies and a “just war” be used not just to dramatize a foreign conflict but to connect to American lives at home?

At the turn of the millennium, information has become an extraordinarily powerful and volatile tool. The events in Kosovo and East Timor have demonstrated that the handling of information is central to diplomatic, military and humanitarian missions alike. And in today's 24/7 all-news, all-the-time environment, the potential for manipulation and distortion of information is exponentially greater than it was even 15 or 20 years ago. The pressure for constant news delivery, not only on radio and television, but also on the Internet, will continue to exacerbate that potential but it will also increase the opportunities for NGOs and others to contribute to the framing and reframing of what is news.

¹ There were certain international stories that looked specifically at children, but these were rare and received little attention:

- an article in *The Washington Post* that discussed the psychological trauma of Kosovo for its child victims was buried in the Health section, on page Z 12;
- an article in *Newsweek* that described a book about a 14-year-old Japanese killer (written by his parents) was on page 71; and
- a story that aired both on CBS (on its evening news program) and on NBC (on the “Today” show) about a fire in South Korea that killed 23 children in a summer camp was given 90 words (about 15-20 seconds of airtime) on CBS and 55 words on NBC. (CNNI, Sky News and BBC World, however, devoted a good deal of time to the children’s death — including second- and third-day stories as the cause of the fire was investigated.)

² Katie Woodruff, Lori Dorfman and Liana Winett, “Frames on Children and Youth in US Newspapers,” delivered at “Media Matters: The Institute on News and Social Problems,” 29-30 September 1995, p. 6.

³ Johanna McGeary, “Crimes of War,” *Time*, pp. 24, 26. (Recall, too, that newsmagazines are forward dated. They carry a Monday cover date, but are typically on newsstands the Tuesday before that date — having gone to press the Saturday night before that.)

⁴ “CBS Evening News,” 10 July 1999.

⁵ Celia Dugger, “In Pakistani Village, Distrust of Indians as Raw as Ever,” *The New York Times*, 6 July 1999, p. A3.

⁶ Photograph by Thomas Dworzak-Wostok, *US News & World Report*, 5 July 1999, p. 40.

⁷ Photograph by Yannis Kontos, Sygma, *Time*, 28 June 1999, p. 31.

⁸ Joshua Hammer, “Ashes and Rubble,” *Newsweek*, 28 June 1999, p. 26.

⁹ Rod Nordland, “Daddy, They’re Killing Us,” *Newsweek*, 28 June 1999, p. 22.

¹⁰ Hideko Takayama, “Begetting a Best Seller,” *Newsweek*, 21 June 1999, p. 71.

¹¹ Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, (NY, 1929), p. 185.

¹² “The Horror at Suva Reka,” *Newsweek*, 28 June 1999, p. 24.

¹³ “NBC Nightly News,” 23 June 1999; ABC “World News Tonight,” 24 June 1999.

¹⁴ “NBC Nightly News,” 4 July 1999; ABC “World News Tonight,” 4 July 1999; “CBS Evening News,” 5 July 1999.

¹⁵ Paul Watson, “Lives of Children Kept Mother Going,” *Los Angeles Times*, 27 June 1999, p. A10.

¹⁶ “NBC Nightly News,” 30 June 1999.

¹⁷ Richard Chacon, “Mexico Neighbors Fight an Industry’s Pollution,” *The Boston Globe*, 29 June 1999, p. A1.

¹⁸ Quoted in Sherry Ricchiardi, “Over the Line?” *American Journalism Review* (September 1996), p. 27.

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- ¹⁹ “NBC Nightly News,” 4 July 1999.
- ²⁰ Charles Babington, Jeffrey Smith, “President Visits with Refugees,” *The Washington Post*, 23 June 1999, p. A1.
- ²¹ “NBC Nightly News,” 22 June 1999.
- ²² Julie Tamaki, “The Path to Peace,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 June 1999, p. A10.
- ²³ Photograph by G. Magallon, *The Boston Globe*, 29 June 1999, p. A13.
- ²⁴ Photograph by AFP, *The Boston Globe*, 27 June 1999, p. A 6.
- ²⁵ Hideko Takayama, “Begetting a Best Seller,” *Newsweek*, 21 June 1999, p. 71.
- ²⁶ c.f. Woodruff, Dorfman and Winett, “Frames on Children and Youth in US Newspapers,” p. 8.
- ²⁷ photograph by Bill Greene, *The Boston Globe*, 22 June 1999, p. A12.
- ²⁸ John Kifner, “After Scotland Yard Inquiry, A Village in Kosovo Buries 64,” *The New York Times*, 6 July 1999, p. A6.
- ²⁹ Johanna McGeary, “Crimes of War,” *Time*, p. 32.
- ³⁰ Ann Hulbert, “Be Fruitful and Subtract,” *The New York Times Book Review*, 14 June 1998, p. 11.
- ³¹ Evelyne Dyck and Gary Coldevin, “Using Positive vs. Negative Photographs for Third-World Fund Raising,” *Journalism Quarterly* 69 (3), fall 1992, pp. 572-79.
- ³² Author interview with Marc Charney.
- ³³ Internal *New York Times* survey. Interview with Bernard Gwertzman, former foreign editor, *The New York Times*.
- ³⁴ Woodruff, Dorfman and Winett, “Frames on Children and Youth in US Newspapers,” p. 9.
- ³⁵ Quoted in “America’s Double-Edged Sword” (editorial), *The Boston Globe*, 5 July 1999, p. A14.
- ³⁶ Philip Shenon, “US Releases files on Abuses in Pinochet Era,” *The New York Times*, 1 July 1999, p. A11.
- ³⁷ Paul Watson, “Prisons, Graves Hold Answers for Many Searchers,” *Los Angeles Times*, 21 June 1999, p. A1.
- ³⁸ Judith Miller, “Annan urges Swift Action on Assistance to Kosovo,” *The New York Times*, 1 July 1999, p. A10.
- ³⁹ Karl Vick, “Night vs. Day in Kosovo,” *The Washington Post*, 11 July 1999, p. A1.
- ⁴⁰ Romesh Ratnesar, “Who Really Won?” *Time*, 21 June 1999, p. 49.
- ⁴¹ Douglas Waller, “The Three Ifs of a Clinton Doctrine,” *Time*, 28 June 1999, p. 35.

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- ⁴² Jim Hoagland, "Kosovos to Come," *The Washington Post*, 27 June 1999, p. B7.
- ⁴³ Quoted in "America's Double-Edged Sword" (editorial), *The Boston Globe*, 5 July 1999, p. A14.
- ⁴⁴ Mortimer Zuckerman, "A Moment to Savor Victory," *US News & World Report*, 21 June 1999, p. 72.
- ⁴⁵ Michael Elliott, "The Lessons of a 'War of Values,'" *Newsweek*, 28 June 1999, p. 29.
- ⁴⁶ "Helping Serbia" (editorial), *The Washington Post*, 22 June 1999, p. A16.
- ⁴⁷ "The Horrors of Kosovo" (editorial), *The New York Times*, 21 June 1999, p. A14.
- ⁴⁸ Johanna McGeary, "Crimes of War," *Time*, 28 June 1999, p. 27.
- ⁴⁹ Stuart Taylor, Jr., "Making the War-Criminal Case," *Newsweek*, 7 June 1999, p. 51.
- ⁵⁰ Johanna McGeary, "Crimes of War," *Time*, 28 June 1999, p. 26.
- ⁵¹ "The Horrors of Kosovo" (editorial), *The New York Times*, 21 June 1999, p. A14.
- ⁵² Charles Sennott, "Kosovar Sees Friend Lead Raid on Her Village," *The Boston Globe*, 1 July 1999, p. A27.
- ⁵³ Debbie Howlett, "Tatters of Village..." *USA Today*, 21 June 1999, p. 8A.
- ⁵⁴ Karl Vick, "A Kosovo Cropland Sown with Corpses," *The Washington Post*, 2 July 1999, p. A22.
- ⁵⁵ Valerie Reitman, "Grim Evidence Reveals Road as Trail of Tears," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 July 1999, p. A1.
- ⁵⁶ Interview with Steve Commins.
- ⁵⁷ The International Criminal Tribunal is trying cases from the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda and investigators from The Hague are gathering evidence in Kosovo. South Africa has established its National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation and national trials have been held in such countries as India, Guatemala, South Korea, Indonesia, Honduras, France, Israel and Germany.
- ⁵⁸ Tom Dorsey, "Covering Tragedies Doesn't Necessarily Have Disastrous Consequences," *The Courier-Journal*, 7 September 1992, Section Features, p. 5D; News, CNN, 2 September 1992, Transcript #108-1, p. 2.