

**“The Importance of Visuals: Television News Coverage and the  
‘CNN Effect.’”**

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The CNN Effect arose during the Gulf War and US operations in Somalia, to describe the loss of control by foreign policymakers in the face of ‘real-time’ television coverage. Over the past decade, a growing number of studies have endeavored to measure the media’s agenda-setting influence on the American government. Reviewing CNN Effect scholarship from the past decade, Gilboa investigates why the theory has yet to be widely confirmed or disproved.<sup>1</sup> The major problem with past studies, he argues has been the lack of uniformity when defining the media’s agenda setting role. To date, several different interpretations of media effects have been utilized. Another fatal shortcoming arises in case selection. Theory testing has been limited to complex humanitarian crises rather than more general foreign policy issues such as trade and treaty negotiations. Moreover, a substantial portion of the cases analyzed have been confined to post-Cold War military interventions, such as Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda and the northern Iraq.

To overcome these difficulties, Gilboa proscribes several avenues for future research designed to broaden understanding of reach and scope of the CNN Effect. One suggestion is for the incorporation of contextual variables, such as changes to the international system resulting from 9/11 and innovations in communications technology. Others look towards applying the theory to different types of foreign policy issue areas and political elites indirectly involved in the policymaking process.

While Gilboa makes very salient observations regarding, missing from his critical analysis is the lack of attention most studies pay towards the content of news stories. An overwhelming majority of studies on the CNN Effect tend to use the timing and concentration of media stories to explain decision making.<sup>2</sup> Timing and concentration of stories are important

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<sup>1</sup> Eytan Gilboa, “The CNN Effect: The Search for a Communication Theory of International Relations,” Political Communication, (2005, volume 22) pp. 27-44.

<sup>2</sup> C.f. Nik Gowing, Real-Time Coverage of Armed Conflicts and Diplomatic Crises: Does it Pressure or Distort Foreign-Policy Decisions? Working Paper 94-1, (1994), Harvard University, Kennedy School of Government; Peter Viggo Jakobsen, “Focus on the CNN Effect Misses the Point: The Real Media Impact on Conflict Management is Invisible and Indirect,” Journal of Peace Research (2000, volume 37) pp. 131-43; Piers Robinson, “The CNN Effect: Can the News Media Drive Foreign Policy?” Review of International Studies (1999, volume 25) pp. 301-9; Steven Livingston and Todd Eachus, “Humanitarian Crises and U.S. Foreign Policy: Somalia and the CNN Effect

pieces to the puzzle; they provide information in regards to policy openings. However, taken alone, these items only inform us the subject was deemed worthy of reporting. Given that the CNN Effect assumes media power lies in the story's persuasive message, it becomes important to understand exactly what they are saying, especially if the larger questions being asked refer to the amount of influence reporting exerts on policymaking.

Thus far, few scholars have undertaken contextual analysis of media reporting in humanitarian crises. Mermin's analysis of American interventions from Grenada to Somalia is limited to the incorporation of news text.<sup>3</sup> Newscast summaries were measured to determine the level of dissenting opinions incorporated in the media's coverage. Robinson's analysis of story content is more involved. In this instance, the news text is coded to provide a measure of the media's ability to draw the viewer into identifying with the plight of individuals affected by the ongoing crises. While the addition of the substantive dimension to media analysis is a positive step forward, visual images are just as important to viewers when making judgments about the political world.<sup>4</sup>

If, as the CNN Effect assumes, it is the story that is responsible for influencing policymakers to take positive action in an attempt to solve a humanitarian crisis, then patterns should emerge when comparing stories from instances of intervention and non-intervention. This exploratory study attempts to do just that. First, by reviewing previous research on framing and media coverage of international affairs, I develop a framework to identifying what patterns should be present in media coverage of humanitarian crises. Next, using the assumptions of the

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Reconsidered," Political Communication, (1995, volume 12): 413-429; Steven Livingston, Clarifying the CNN Effect: An Examination of Media Effects According to Type of Military Intervention, (Cambridge, Mass.: Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Mermin. Debating War and Peace: Media Coverage of U.S. Intervention in the Post-Vietnam Era. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Jonathan Merman. "Conflict in the Sphere of Consensus? Critical Reporting on the Panama Invasion and the Gulf War." Political Communication. 13 (1996) pp. 181-94.

<sup>4</sup> Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, "Freezing Out the Public: Elite and Media Framing of the U.S. Anti-Nuclear Movement," Political Communication, (1993, Volume 10) pp. 153-73.

CNN Effect theory, I set out a series of testable propositions. Finally, these propositions are tested using network news coverage of Rwanda during both the genocide and refugee phases of the crisis.

### Media Frames and the Packaging of Political Events

When looking at television news coverage, there are two intertwined messages being delivered to viewers – verbal and visual. Verbal message convey specific information regarding a news event, the who, what, where, and why of a subject. Through their descriptions, media can convey the desperation found in many humanitarian crises, along with any potential solutions to alleviate the problem. Visual images are contextual; they reinforce the verbal information the stories present.

Stark images of a famine – emaciated children, with wide-eyes, and even larger stomachs, their listless bodies covered with flies – have the ability to convey the severity of the situation more than a report stating 3 million people are dying of starvation. As Moeller notes, visual images have the ability to not only to capture the viewers’ attention, they also can make people care about a specific event.<sup>5</sup> This is of importance to the study of the CNN Effect. If the media are not using evocative images to portray the disastrousness of the event, it makes it difficult for viewers to care about the victims enough that they want the government to take action.<sup>6</sup>

Because the content of the story influences viewers’ interest, how the story is covered – including both visuals and story line becomes important to the research design.<sup>7</sup> The remainder

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<sup>5</sup> Susan D. Moeller, Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death, (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Shanto Iyengar and Adam Simon, “News Coverage of the Gulf Crises and Public Opinion: A Study of Agenda-Setting, Priming, and Framing,” in W. Lance Bennett and David Paletz, eds. Taken By Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf War (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 167-185;

of the section is devoted to the process of incorporating visual images into humanitarian intervention analysis. The first part is devoted to exploring how the media convey complex events to viewers, also referred to as framing. From the discussion about framing, it will be possible to construct a series of propositions to be tested, utilizing the basic assumptions underlying the CNN Effect.

### Framing Political Events

Framing analysis involves the study of how the media compress information into a single news story.<sup>8</sup> Nelson, Clawson and Oxley define framing simply as "the process by which a communication source, such as a news organization, defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy."<sup>9</sup> Also relevant, however, is the reaction by the viewing public and government officials to these information constructs. Gamson and Mogdiliansi incorporate the concept of viewer response when they describe the process of framing as "[a] central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue."<sup>10</sup> Frames, then, are tools to understand political discourse. They provide a structure that not only creates the context for political events, but also the necessary ingredients viewers need to decode and understand the information provided to them.

Regardless of the specific issue being presented, however, all frames share several basic components. According to Iyengar, news stories are organized in one of two manners. In the

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Thomas Patterson. Out of Order. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); W. Russell Neuman, Marian Just and Ann Crigler. Common Knowledge: News and the Construction of Political Meaning. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, News That Matters: Television and Public Opinion, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Shanto Iyengar, Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas E. Nelson, Rosalee A. Clawson, and Zoe M. Oxley. "Media Framing of A Civil Liberties Conflict and its Effect on Tolerance." American Political Science Review. 91:3 (September 1997) p. 567.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Thomas E. Nelson and Donald R. Kinder. "Issue Frames and Group-Centerism in American Public Opinion." Journal of Politics. 58:4 (November 1996), p. 1057.

*episodic frame*, the report is structured predominately around a specific event; it is a story "that illustrate issues."<sup>11</sup> Operationally, the episodic frame consists of stories that "present on-the-scene coverage of "hard news" and are often visually compelling."<sup>12</sup> This is compared with the *thematic frame*, which focuses more on general information relating to an issue. Such types of news stories would provide "collective or general evidence...that [depict] issues more generally either in terms of collective outcomes, public policy debates, or historical trends."<sup>13</sup> Iyengar notes that in practice, most news stories contain elements of both types of frames, but the episodic form dominates American television.

Beyond the general structure, all news stories also contain specific rhetorical elements. Gamson and Lasch refer to these components an interpretive package. The "interpretive package has a core consisting of an overall frame and position that defines it. The frame suggests a central organizing idea for understanding events related to the issue in question."<sup>14</sup> By utilizing a particular frame of reference, along with visual images, metaphors relating the current issue to past issues, popular catchphrases or 'buzz-words,' and arguments to sway individual reasoning, the interpretive package becomes a navigational tool enabling the public to interpret the news presented by the media.<sup>15</sup>

Frames are more than merely an efficient means of streamlining political communication, however. They are extremely important to political dialogue because of their ability to alter individual perceptions about the political world. This alteration occurs by highlighting what Nelson and Kinder refer to as the "considerations" individuals use to formulate their opinion.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible?*, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible?*, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> William Gamson and Kathryn E. Lasch. "The Political Culture of Social Welfare Policy." In Shimon E. Spiro and Ephraim Yuchtman-Yaar, eds. *Evaluating the Welfare State: Social and Political Perspectives*. (New York: Academic Press, 1983). p. 398. For more information about the roles of these individual components, see William A. Gamson. *Talking Politics*. (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1992); Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki. "Freezing Out the Public."

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Nelson and Kinder, "Issue Frames and Group-Centrism," 1996.

When the media repeatedly use a particular frame to organize information, viewers recognize the ideas as being the key to evaluate an issue. These new ideas are then incorporated into the person's belief-system, and are then accessed to formulate opinions about the political issue. In regards to the CNN Effect, of interest is the ability of network news stories to alter individual “considerations” to the extent that intervention in a humanitarian crisis becomes a favorable policy option.

### Framing and International News

Because global politics and events are far removed from most Americans' daily experiences, they rely upon the news media for both information and guidance. This reliance upon the media may in fact increase their ability to frame public sentiment.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, knowledge about framing and its effects are less concrete in the realm international politics.

Iyengar found significant framing effects in his analysis of episodic and thematic frames in news regarding international terrorism and the Iran-Contra Scandal in the 1980's. When incidents of international were presented from an episodic standpoint, subjects were more likely to blame the individual perpetrators for the attacks. In contrast, thematic coverage of the same events lead respondents to favor policy responses by the American government to prevent future attacks. Furthermore, respondents who viewed stories about the Iran-Contra Scandal framed around the political controversy of the scandal or on debates about President Reagan's competence as a leader were more likely than others to hold the President personally responsible for the events causing the scandal.<sup>18</sup>

Entman's comparison of news coverage surrounding two incidents where national military forces attacked foreign passenger jets also indicates a relationship between media frames

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<sup>17</sup> Newman, Just and Crigler, Common Knowledge; Robert Entman, “Framing U.S. Coverage of International News: Contrasts in Narratives of the KAL and Iran Air Incidents.” Journal of Communication. 41 (1991). pp. 6-27.

<sup>18</sup> Iyengar, Is Anyone Responsible?; Iyengar, “Framing Responsibility.”

and government responsibility.<sup>19</sup> He finds that the difference in media portrayal produced significant effects on both the public and policy outcomes. Coverage focusing on the victims and providing schematics of the plane crash led the public to see the downing of Korean Air Flight 803 by the Soviet Army as a moral tragedy. The American public was less sympathetic when the US shot down an Iranian passenger plane. Possibly, Entman argues, because media coverage focused less on the victims, and more on the possibility that the incident resulted from a technical malfunction of the American carrier's radar apparatus. In both cases, Congress was able to use public sentiment in order to pass legislation to advance national interests within the respective regions.

Both studies illustrate the effectiveness of media frames during the Cold War. However, as Norris observes, the end of the Cold War has meant television news lacks a dominant frame with which to organize international events. The ongoing East-West tensions allowed media to categorize almost any international event in terms of an "us-them" or "friend-enemy frame." A similarly predominant frame has yet to emerge in the post-Cold War era. The result, according to Norris, is "that television news...may have far greater problems in explaining America's role in the world and in making sense of international development for viewers who lack familiar benchmarks to distinguish "friends" from "enemies.""<sup>20</sup> This confusion in structuring the portrayal of global events is reiterated by Entman.<sup>21</sup> To cope with this new situation, he sees the media introducing non-official explanations of international affairs and increasing the use of visuals in news stories. Entman concludes that these new modifications have resulted not only in a more conflictual presentation of international news, but also in increased pressure by the

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<sup>19</sup> Entman, "Framing U.S. Coverage of International News."

<sup>20</sup> Pippa Norris. "The Restless Searchlight: Network News Framing of the Post-Cold War World." Political Communication. 12 (1995). pp. 357-70.

<sup>21</sup> Robert M. Entman, "Declarations of Independence: The Growth of Media Power After the Cold War." In Brigitte L. Nacos, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Pierangelo Isernia, eds. Decisionmaking in a Glass House: Mass Media, Public Opinion, and American and European Foreign Policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000). pp. 11-26.

government to react to the medias' interpretation of said events – an assumption also found in the CNN Effect.

### Framing and Humanitarian Crises

Studies looking at the effect of media on policymaking during humanitarian crises have included the content of stories as variables only recently. Testing for media indexing in a series of American interventions since the Vietnam War, Mermin uses a measure for criticism within media reports. Robinson goes further, creating a measure of media frames in studying humanitarian interventions. Analyzing both newspaper and television coverage of the crises in Kosovo, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Somalia, he categorizes media stories into two general frames, empathy/distance and support/critical. The empathy/distance frame assesses the extent to which media characterized affected populations as empathetic to American viewers. As with Mermin's analysis, the support/critical frame seeks to determine the amount of elite criticism within society over any given humanitarian crisis.

Taken together, both studies represent advancement in the study of media and humanitarian crises. Each study systematically analyzes the content of media stories in an effort to determine media influence over administration policymaking. The problem, however, is the focus on the verbal cues presented in media reports. Television is a visual medium; the importance of the message is not only limited to what is said, but also what is shown. This is especially true in humanitarian crises, which abound in tragic circumstances of starvation, displacement, and death. However, both studies do present a starting point, indicating what may be expected when visual images are included as part of a research design. It is to this topic, the discussion now turns.

### Combining Frames and the CNN Effect

As Strobel states, the CNN Effect is commonly “understood to be a loss of policy control on the part of government policymakers.”<sup>22</sup> Through its ability to broadcast humanitarian crises in ‘real-time’ from remote corners of the globe, the media exerts two effects. First, it shortens the time policymakers have to respond to breaking crises, thus pressuring them to do something they would not do otherwise, simply because the administration desires to look like it is being responsive to the situation.<sup>23</sup> Second, coverage of the crises results in pressure from the domestic public, who believe the United States has a responsibility to ‘solve’ the countries problems. In both instances, the pressure is being created by a saturation of media stories conveying a message of desperation and a need for an outside solution to the problem. Utilizing some of the constructs from the framing studies addressed in the previous section, it is possible to establish a set of expectations regarding the content of television coverage during humanitarian crises.

According to Iyengar, all media stories are framed as either episodic or thematic events. We can assume, then, that the verbal portion of news coverage should manifest itself in one of two different forms. First, coverage could be episodic, concentrating on the victims of the crises. Conversely, coverage could be thematic, focusing more generally on the catastrophic nature of the event, including policy measures taken to resolve the crisis.

Adding in Robinson’s empathy and support construct frames, it is possible to envision television reports that include elements designed to evoke sympathy from viewers, perhaps by utilizing an episodic frame. Some possible elements include comments about the chaotic nature of the event, the plight of refugees or victims, and efforts by international aid workers to alleviate the suffering. Stories employing a distance and critical frames would prevent viewers from

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<sup>22</sup> Warren P. Strobel. “The Media and U.S. Policies Towards Intervention: A Closer Look and the ‘CNN Effect’.” In Cocker, et. al. eds. Managing Global Chaos: Sources of and Responses to International Conflict. (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996). p. 358.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

emotionally connecting with crisis victims. Potential story angles in these reports would include discussions about the origins of the crisis, along with references to United Nations or American policymakers and their efforts at finding a political solution to the crisis. Because the CNN Effect assumes that media pressure is a function of persuasive messages, we can advance the following propositions about the verbal portions of television coverage:

- *Proposition 1:* When the CNN Effect occurs, it is expected that television news coverage will be dominated by human –interest stories designed to evoke sense empathy amongst the viewing public. The stories themselves would center on the 'victims' of the crisis, and contain arguments for why the US should be involved in the situation.

Robinson's empathy/distance frame should also be present in the story visuals. During reports designed to invoke empathy, stories can be accompanied by dramatic images of innocent victims and their sufferings. Moreover, as Moeller argues, viewers need a constant stream of these types of images in order to develop a sense of sympathy with viewers.<sup>24</sup> Thus, stories designed to draw in viewers should be frequent and contain abundant images of individual suffering. Distance stories should then contain less dramatic images. Tying back into Iyengar's thematic frames, we should also see more abstract visuals, including government officials and international aid workers, who would function as policy experts in this context.

- *Proposition 2:* When the CNN Effect occurs, it is expected that the visuals accompanying television news coverage should be dominated by images of individual victims, clearly indicating the tremendous suffering they are experiencing.

## Methodology

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<sup>24</sup> Moeller, Compassion Fatigue.

In order to test the two propositions listed above, it is necessary to select a case where the CNN Effect was in operation. Case selection could prove problematic, since previous research has yet to identify a single case where the CNN Effect has been validated – a factor noted in the introduction. However, a brief overview at both public opinion polls and American policy during the Rwandan genocide of 1994, indicate the case is a good candidate to examine the two propositions sated above

From April to June 1994, the American public did not favor a commitment of American resources to stop the genocide in Rwanda. Monthly Harris Polls conducted during the time of the crisis indicate no significant proportion of the population considered Rwanda to be an important issue needing government attention.<sup>25</sup> Moeller also notes that a Time/CNN poll conducted in May indicated that 51% of Americans polled were opposed to any type of action regarding Rwanda.<sup>26</sup> Yet by the refugee crisis of mid-summer, public opinion moved in the opposite direction. A Harris poll conducted during this time showed 1% of the people polled listed Rwanda as an important issue for the government to address.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, considering that debate over Universal Health Care and the beginning of the sensational O.J. Simpson trial were both prominent domestic issues, for an event in a distant African country to garner public attention is no small thing.<sup>28</sup>

During the genocide of April-June 1994, the Clinton administration viewed the problem not as genocide, but as a peacekeeping crisis the United States must avoid at any cost. Domestically, this meant a policy of avoidance and denial. Within the United Nations Security Council, the United States followed a policy of obstructionism. In a complete policy shift, the

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<sup>25</sup> Respondents were asked, “What do you think are the two most important issues for the government to address?” Responses were spontaneous, and the majority reported domestic issues as being most important. Harris Poll.

<sup>26</sup> Moeller, Compassion Fatigue.

<sup>27</sup> For question, see fn. 25. While this number is small number of respondents, there were over 30 specific problems the sample as a whole had highlighted.

<sup>28</sup> Steven Livingstone and Todd Eachus, “Rwanda: U.S. Policy and Television Coverage.”

Clinton administration took one of the lead roles in the refugee crisis of that summer, deploying 4200 troops to the region and pressing both the international community to come to the aid of the displaced Hutu.<sup>29</sup> The *New York Times* estimates that American contributions totaled approximately 40% of the total amount of aid flowing into the area, a contribution far greater than any other country or international organization.<sup>30</sup>

Although the movement was small, the American public did become aware of, and supportive for, intervention in the case of the Goma refugees. Moreover, these changes in public opinion correspond with a massive shift in American foreign policy in the area. Taken together, this appears to be an instance where the media is changing public opinion and administration actions regarding a foreign policy event, exactly what the CNN Effect predicts. We would therefore expect differences in television coverage between coverage of the genocide and refugee crisis.

### Television News Reports

The television news stories of the Rwandan crises were obtained from the *Vanderbilt Television Archives*, a repository containing evening news coverage by the three major national networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS since 1968. Since it was not possible to analyze all of the Rwandan stories contained in the archive, a sample of stories was used. Because the *Vanderbilt* search engine did not report its findings in chronological or network order, the first story for each day of coverage was selected, regardless of the station broadcasting the story. This process yielded 72 stories. While this method is not truly random, it is an objective means of ensuring that all days that coverage did exist were included in the analysis.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Micheal Wines, "U.S. Sending Force of 200 to Reopen Rwandan Airport," *New York Times*, 30 July 1994: Sec. 1:1; Samantha Power, *"A Problem From Hell" America and the Age of Genocide*, (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Scott Peterson, *Me Against My Brother: At War in Somalia, Sudan, and Rwanda*, (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> John H. Cushman, Jr. "The Rwanda Disaster: The Overview; President Orders Pentagon Action to Aid Rwandans," *New York Times* 23 July 1994: sec. 1: 1.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.tvnews.vanderbilt.edu>. Weekend news coverage was excluded, due to the slow news phenomenon. In

The text for each story was obtained in several ways. Where available, transcripts were downloaded from *Academic Universe*. When possible, the remainder of the stories was transcribed by the author off broadcasts borrowed from the *Vanderbilt Archives*. For a small percentage of stories full transcriptions were not made. In these instances, detailed notes of the stories, including quotes from international relief personnel and government officials exist.

Visual data were recorded along with textual information. Each news story was viewed multiple times. Initial attention was focused on the verbal/textual information given, with precedence given to descriptions of the story line and then a rough categorization in regards to frames. After noting story line, I viewed the report once again, with attention being focused on the accompanying visual images. In all cases, the placement of the visuals was noted, stating where they corresponded with the text of the report. The news story was then subjected to a final series of viewings, with detailed descriptions of images being made. Visual information recorded included: types of subjects (civilians, military, aid workers, and government officials), facial expressions, motion (e.g. people walking, soldiers riding in tanks, battles, etc.) and the surroundings where the video footage was filmed. Each story was viewed a minimum of five times, with longer reports subject to more viewings.

The resulting transcripts and visual data were then subject to a series of separate content analyses, two of the text and one for the visuals. For the first textual analysis, the unit of analysis was the paragraph; in the second analysis, the unit of analysis was the entire news story. In the case of the visuals, the unit of analysis was the individual image.

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these instances, there usually is a shortage of political activity to report on. To make up for this shortage, the networks will include stories that are not at the top of the political agenda. Because it is impossible to determine if weekend reports on humanitarian crises are the result of the slow news day phenomenon or an attempt to introduce these issues onto the political agenda, they were excluded from the analysis.

*Content Analysis I: Story Frames.* The purpose of the initial content analysis was to determine the frame(s) used in the news story.<sup>32</sup> Iyengar argues that all media stories are structured according to either an episodic or thematic frame.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the first assessment made was if the story was episodic or thematic in nature. As discussed earlier, episodic frames focus on specific events, while thematic stories focus on background information or policies related to a political event.

However, as Iyengar has discovered, episodic coverage of news events leads the viewer to place the responsibility of solving political problems with individuals, rather than the government.<sup>34</sup> In cases of humanitarian crises, this may mean that high levels of episodic news coverage may in fact create a disincentive for the adoption of intervention policies. By making further distinctions between these two basic types of frames based on the substance of the news coverage, the content of television news about humanitarian crises can be better assessed.

The specific distinctions between types of episodic and thematic frames constitute the second portion of the initial content analysis. These categories refer to specific traits of both humanitarian crises and interventions. An initial set of frames was constructed, corresponding to commentary on the nature of the crisis, civilian victims, military conflict, the presence of Americans, and governmental policy. A pretest of 13 stories, selected from the original sample, was conducted. Attention was paid not only to the presence of the frames, but also the manner in which the frames were represented in the story line. Following the pre-test, the various media frames were redefined, and then all the stories from the sample were coded based on the appearance of 4 subject frames: *Overall State of the Situation, Military Conflict, Civilian*

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<sup>32</sup> As Iyengar notes, most news stories contain more than one frame. When the data was analyzed, the predominant frame was used. See Appendix for the coding sheet given to the coders.

<sup>33</sup> Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible?*; Iyengar, "Framing Responsibility."

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

*Effects, American, and Policy.* (For more information on the individual codes and the coding sheets, see Appendix A.)

*Content Analysis II: Directionality and Descriptions.* The second textual analysis was designed to ascertain both the directionality of the news coverage and specific adjectives used to describe the famine or genocide. News reports were coded as for, against, or neutral regarding potential US involvement in the crisis, as well as supportive, neutral or in opposition to current US policy regarding the ongoing crisis. When combined with the various types of textual frames, the directionality of the news report may reinforce the position that the US must/not take actions to solve the crisis.

As Moeller and Robinson find, the specific words used to describe a humanitarian crisis may lead the viewer to identify with the victims of the crises.<sup>35</sup> By using words such as horrible, catastrophic, misery, despair, and the like to describe the situation, these verbal cues may again reinforce the level of identification the viewers make with the civilian 'victims' of the crisis and create a sense of immediacy.

*Content Analysis III: Story Visuals.* Visual images are also important because not only can images be easier to process, but they may also reinforce ideas presented in the story. Based on descriptions of the visuals, the number of times images of civilian victims, aid workers, military personnel, military equipment, combat scenes, anchors or reporters, or government officials (domestic and international) were featured in the story was recorded. If news coverage of instances of famine and genocide do coincide with decisions to intervene, then images of victims should feature highly in these reports.

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<sup>35</sup> Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*; Robinson, *The CNN Effect*.

## Analysis and Results

### Overview of the Crisis

The Rwandan genocide is actually an interrelated tale of three events: the systematic slaughter of Tutsi by the Rwandan government, the civil war between government forces and the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), and a massive refugee crisis in neighboring Zaire. The genocide was the political response to an apparent threat to the Hutu government by the external RPF, the domestic Tutsi population, and politically moderate Hutu. The civil war started as an RPF response to the killing of Rwandan Tutsi by the Hutu extremists. Finally, the refugee crisis was triggered when millions of Rwandan Hutus fled the country in the wake of RPF success.

The genocide began with the death of Rwanda's president, Juvenal Habyarimana, in a plane crash on April 6, 1994. The resulting power vacuum allowed extremists within the military to rapidly establish an interim government. After eliminating all opposition within Kigali, the government then turned its efforts towards the general Tutsi population, and the genocide spread to the countryside. The bulk of the genocide had taken place by April 21.<sup>36</sup> Sporadic killings of Tutsi took place from May through mid-July, when small groups in hiding were discovered by government forces. Over one million people were killed during the genocide.<sup>37</sup>

The genocide triggered another round in the country's civil war. RPF forces stationed in Kigali began to fight the government forces in an effort to stop the killings. They were soon joined by the remainder of the RPF camped in neighboring Uganda. The Rwandan Armed Forces, split between defending themselves from the attack and carrying out the genocide proved to be no match for the RPF. By mid-June, the rebel forces were in control the entire eastern half

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<sup>36</sup> Alison, Des Forges, Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda, (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999); Alan J. Kuperman, The Limits of Humanitarian Intervention: Genocide in Rwanda, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001); L.R. Melvern, A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide, (New York: Zed Books, 2000).

<sup>37</sup> Peterson, Me Against My Brother; Michael Barnett, Eyewitness to a Genocide: the United Nations and Rwanda, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

of the country, had pushed the interim government from Gitarama, and were closing in on the western edges of the country.<sup>38</sup> Only the intervention of the French in late June prevented the RPF from taking over the entire country. Foreign intervention, however, was of little help to the interim government. On July 4, French troops unilaterally declared a safe haven in the southwest of the country, leaving the government strongholds of Giseyni and Ruhengeri without protection from advancing RPF troops.<sup>39</sup>

The end of the civil war and the genocide occurred on July 18, 1994 with a declaration of a national government of unity by the RPF. On its heels came the single largest population movement the world had ever seen. From July 14 to July 17, over 1 million Rwandans, mostly Hutu, crossed the border from Rwanda into neighboring Zaire. One source estimated the traffic flow to be approximately 10,000 an hour.<sup>40</sup> The refugees consisted mostly of peasants, along with members of the former government, including the remainder of the army and the militias.

Goma, a small provincial town in far eastern Zaire, was not equipped to handle to massive influx of refugees. Nor were the few NGOs present. Within a matter of days, the migrant population began to settle in the countryside surrounding the country. Conditions within the camps were horrific. There was little in the way of shelter, food, medicine and sanitation. Refugees were forced to scavenge for material to build makeshift shelters and stand in line for what little food was available. Human waste and decaying bodies eventually contaminated the nearby lakes and streams. Within a week, the three established camps experienced a cholera epidemic, threatening those not killed by hunger or violence.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Des Forges, Leave None To Tell; Melvern, A People Betrayed; Kuperman, The Limits of Humanitarian Intervention; Sean Murphy, Humanitarian Intervention: The United Nations in an Evolving World Order, V. 21, Procedural Aspects of International Law, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996); Kuperman, The Limits of Humanitarian Intervention; Christian P. Scherrer, Genocide and Crisis in Central Africa: Conflict, Roots, Mass Violence, and Regional War, (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2002).

<sup>39</sup> Des Forges, Leave None To Tell; Melvern, A People Betrayed; Kuperman, The Limits of Humanitarian Intervention.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.; Ian Martin, "Hard Choices after Genocide: Human Rights and Political Failures in Rwanda," in ed. Jonathan Moore, Hard Choices: Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998) pp. 157-175.

<sup>41</sup> Op.Cit.

### Television Reporting of the Genocide and Refugee Crises

Media coverage of the Rwandan genocide and civil war began on April 7, the day after President Habyarimana's plane crash. Throughout the entire genocide and refugee crisis, the three national television networks devoted 208 minutes of coverage to the event. Sixty-seven stories, totaling approximately 85 minutes were sampled for this study. The period of the genocide and civil war – April 6 through July 13, 1994 – contained 48 stories and 32 minutes of coverage, while the refugee crisis – running from July 14 until August 14, 1994 – consisted of 19 stories and 42 minutes of coverage.

According to the two propositions discussed earlier in the study, television news coverage of the Rwandan crises is expected to vary depending upon the phase of the crisis. Lacking the support of the American public and interest the government, the CNN Effect is not evident in the genocide portion of the crises. Coverage of the event, therefore, should not be dominated by stories and images of the genocide victims, elements assumed to elicit empathy amongst viewers. The refugee crisis, however, evoked both support and interest by the American mass public and government alike; a climate described by the CNN Effect. Television news coverage, therefore, should reflect the patterns outlined in the two propositions: story lines centered on the refugees and visual images depicting their misery in all of its awful glory. An examination of the coverage indicates the patterns of news coverage to be correct in both situations.

**News Coverage of the Genocide.** What is interesting about network news coverage of the genocide is not the number of the stories, but their type and content. Of the 48 total stories, 35

are blurbs of 30 seconds or less, constituting 73% of the total coverage. With the dangerous conditions in Rwanda, it might be expected that limited amounts of information would be available outside the country in the initial stages of the genocide. However, the blurb format ran throughout the entire span, even when the arrival of the French towards the end of June afforded relatively safe conditions for reporters. This lack of attention translates into a limited information base for the American mass public, something that may have contributed to its lack of interest in Rwanda. Closer examination of the content reveals story constructs that are designed inform, but not evoke an empathetic response by the audience.

Descriptions of the conflict were of faceless conflict, not of individual suffering. Adjectives such as, “tribal,” “massacres,” “fighting,” “slaughter,” “bloody,” and “civil war” were repeated numerous times in a variety of conjunctions. The term “genocide” was used only four times throughout the 35 news stories: May 31, June 7, June 14, and July 1.<sup>42</sup> Even then, it was placed in conjunction with the ongoing civil war. The majority of news reports did not link the slaughter of the Tutsi with the policy of genocide and the flight of Hutu as fearing retribution for their participation in the Tutsi slaughter. Indeed, as late as June 20, CBS refers to the situation as one of “civil war and tribal massacres.”<sup>43</sup>

The intertwining of genocide and civil war are further evident in the Conflict frame. This frame dominated reporting, being used in 23 of the 35 stories. Substantively, several themes run through these 23 stories. First, is the impersonal tone – very little on-site reporting is presenting. Instead, the vast majority of the reports are studio blurbs, lasting 30 seconds or less. As a result, very little information about the conflict is presented. Indeed, much of the coverage consists of ‘updates’ on the situation – brief statements that the conflict is continuing, along with periodic

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<sup>42</sup> World News Tonight with Peter Jennings, May 31, 1994; World News Tonight with Peter Jennings, June 7, 1994; CBS Evening News, June 14, 1994; World News Tonight with Peter Jennings, July 1, 1994.

<sup>43</sup> Connie Chung, *CBS Evening News*, June 20, 1994.

estimates of overall fatalities. Second is the substance of these ‘updates.’ The bulk of the stories discuss the status of the rebel offensive, concentrating primarily on the fighting in Kigali.

Occasionally interspersed in these stories are reports about the discovery of killing sites – a schoolhouse south of Kigali on May 13 and of a church and school on June 15.<sup>44</sup> However, only on the 15<sup>th</sup> is the event called an act of genocide; the violence on May 13 was referred to as “further evidence of the slaughter.”<sup>45</sup> None of the stories refer to the crisis’ origins. The closest television coverage came to providing explanations was on May 4, when ABC noted that the killings seem to be resulting from Hutu extremists “desperate for power.” Even then, no distinction was made that these killings were a genocide that was related to the civil war.<sup>46</sup>

Even coverage utilizing the Civilian Effects frame created a sense of distance from the event. Again, no distinction was made between effects of the civil war and genocide. As with stories containing the Conflict frame, most coverage of civilian effects was through short studio blurbs. The blurbs concentrated almost exclusively on refugees, many simply noting that they were “pouring out” of the country and into Tanzania.<sup>47</sup> Providing a slightly more nuanced view of the conflict were several longer stories airing periodically over the three month period.

Children seemed to be the focus of several of these longer civilian effects stories. One of the earliest stories, aired at the end of April, described the evacuation of children to Italy. Later stories aired describing attacks on several orphanages in the country. The danger the children were in, however, was referred to only tangentially, with phrases such as “their eyes full of the unimaginable horrors of one of the most vicious mass crimes of the century,<sup>48</sup>” and “The men who did this killing went after everyone, no matter how young.”<sup>49</sup> Rather, the emphasis was on

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<sup>44</sup> *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, May 13, 1994; *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, June 15, 1994.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> “Violence Continues in Rwanda,” *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, May 4, 1994.

<sup>47</sup> *CBS Evening News*, April 15, 1994.

<sup>48</sup> “Rwandan Government Soldiers Embarked on Orgy of Murder, Killing More Than 100,000 Members of the Tutsi Tribe; UN Bails Out.” *CBS Evening News*, April 28, 1994.

<sup>49</sup> *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, June 7, 1994.

the context of the civil war, with one of the orphanages being saved by rebel troops and in the other when priests paid off the small band of Hutu extremists. In other words, it was the outcome, not the suffering of innocents which was the focus of these stories.

Refugees were also prominent in the few longer stories utilizing the civilian effects frame. An episodic report from May 2, eerily foreshadowing the crisis in Goma a few months later, chronicled the problems of 250,000 refugees in Tanzania.<sup>50</sup> Much more frequent, however, thematic reports describing the internally displaced. A report in late May, chronicled the exodus of civilians from Kigali. Two stories airing later in June, chronicled rescue attempts by both UNAMIR and the French.<sup>51</sup> Like the children stories, however, the focus was on the ‘rescuers’ and not the victims.

Surprisingly, given the lack of attention paid to the genocide, there was one network news report about the Tutsi. Airing on May 16, and coinciding with the rebel advance toward Gitarama, the story briefly chronicles the plight of Tutsi in the area. Ron Allen describes the crowd gathered behind a metal fence as “some of the only members of the Tutsi tribe who survived in territory controlled by the government – terrified, hungry people seeking sanctuary in church courtyard.”<sup>52</sup> In one of the few instances where images of live genocide victims are portrayed, the camera then shows the previous night’s victim, “a man beaten by rifle butts lay dying, his body tossed into the brush.”<sup>53</sup> However, like the rest of the news coverage about Rwanda, the reporter fails to make the connection about genocide, giving viewers the impression that these are refugees from the civil war. Moreover, the lack of repetition about personal suffering, according to Moeller, makes it much more difficult for an individual to make an emotional attachment with the event. While indeed powerful, one story, no matter how

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<sup>50</sup> *NBC Nightly News*, May 2, 1994.

<sup>51</sup> *CBS Evening News*, June 14, 1994; “Rwandan Nuns Rescued,” *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, June 28, 1994.

<sup>52</sup> Ron Allen, “Rwandan Rebels Gaining Power,” *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, May 16, 1994.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

evocative, is not enough to spark mass interest, especially when the majority of coverage sends a signal that the event is not important.

The final frame utilized in network news coverage of the Rwandan genocide was the policy frame. Unlike the conflict frame, this frame was slightly more informative in regards to policy debates. Far fewer were the blurb stories, totaling only nine stories. Like the conflict stories, these ‘reports’ provided updates on policy actions, including UN resolutions on UNAMIR and Operation Turquoise, as well as US aid to refugee camps in Tanzania. More substantive were the thematic stories. The first two cover the debate between the US and UN over deployment of peacekeeping forces to the area. On May 5, President Clinton is seen responding to the UN’s request for more troops by saying that “the rivals are too determined to fight on and that the UN is not prepared to handle such a mission.<sup>54</sup>” Later on in the month, ABC aired a story about the difficulties following the Security Council vote to institute UNAMIR II, noting disagreement with the US about the force’s mandate<sup>55</sup>. Towards the end of June, another two stories discuss Operation Turquoise. The first, airing on June 27, ties in the debate on staffing UNAMIR II. Mark Phillips, detailing the French arrival in the region notes that the French government deployed their troops in part because the promised peacekeepers have yet to arrive.<sup>56</sup> A little over a week later, the operation’s mandate becomes the focus. With the RPF quickly approaching the newly created safe zone, French troops were ordered to prevent rebel entrance into the area, along with their established duties of protecting the area’s remaining Tutsi.<sup>57</sup>

Also absent from television news coverage of the Rwandan genocide was the lack of criticism of US policy. Indeed, coverage throughout the entire period was quite silent about the

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<sup>54</sup> *NBC Nightly News*, May 5, 1994

<sup>55</sup> *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, May 25, 1994.

<sup>56</sup> “French Provide Stabilizing Effect inside Hutu Territory; Evacuation Plans Foiled by Rebel Offensive on Kigali,” *CBS Evening News*, June 27, 1994.

<sup>57</sup> *NBC Nightly News*, July 4, 1994.

course of the Clinton administration's inaction in Rwanda. Only toward the end of June, did criticism appear. Even then there was no call for direct US involvement in the country. The closest all three of the networks came to open censure of the government came on June 27, when Mark Phillips of CBS stated, "And only the French, whose own history here is not unblemished, can rightly claim that among the major powers, they are the only one that is doing anything."<sup>58</sup> If the American television news elites were in fact in favor of greater involvement in Rwanda, it was not apparent from their broadcasts.

Visually, the coverage was as limited as the verbal information it provided, reinforcing the idea of distance established by the story lines. Seventeen stories, 35% of the total, contained no images from the country. Amongst the remainder of the stories, the emphasis was on the civilian and military aspects of the country. This is not to say that the visuals were lacking in impact. In fact, it was quite the opposite. While infrequent, footage of genocide victims accompanied both on-site and studio reports. Most of this video revealed that the indignities the victims suffered in life carried over to their deaths. Debris strewn streets were lined with piles of bodies resembling refuse heaps ready for weekly collection. In other shots, individuals lay where they were killed; arms and legs akimbo like discarded rag dolls. One of the most dramatic images came on June 7. At what first looks like bundles of clothing heaped on a church floor is then revealed to be a large pile of bodies.<sup>59</sup> Another time, Tutsi seeking sanctuary at a Gitarama church are shown, gazing at the camera from behind a chain link fence, eyes wide, their hands clinging to the fence. More people crowd behind them as far as the eye can see.<sup>60</sup>

Equally disturbing are the refugees and internally displaced. Images of the camps in Tanzania show fields covered with thousands of people, stretching to the horizon in all directions. Other video show shows scared crowds walking towards the camps, many carrying

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<sup>58</sup> "French Provide Stabilizing Effect," *CBS Evening News*, June 27, 1994.

<sup>59</sup> *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, June 7, 1994.

<sup>60</sup> "Rwandan Rebels Gaining Power," *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, May 16, 1994.

their belongings in their arms or on their heads. Swarms of people converge on international relief trucks bearing food and supplies. Footage of Kigali after the governmental army's defeat shows a line of women and children from overhead, the 20 mile line resembling a living piece of decorative ribbon.

Altogether then, a little over half (143) of 267 images, were on Rwandan civilians. These figures, however, are misleading. Of the 143 civilian images, 79 are of refugees, compared to 32 of genocide victims. This means that 30% of total images are devoted to Hutu refugees and only 12% of dead Tutsi, implying that the refugees fleeing the civil war are of greater importance than the dead victims of tribal warfare. Furthermore, the images are not constant. Since reporting of the genocide was inconsistent, viewers were not exposed to on a daily basis to these disturbing images. A stimuli that Moeller argues is required in order for viewers to a mostly connect with the situation.

Reinforcing the framing of the situation as one of civil war are the military images, which constitute 28% of the total images, 74 out of 267. While a majority of the military images are of the French during Operation Turquoise (27 images), the remainder are of the opposing RAF and RPF armies. For the most part, the French soldiers are shown carrying out their duties: on patrol in paint's or on foot, or flying on reconnaissance missions. RPF and governmental forces, on the other hand, were seen in a less friendly light. Along with several battle scenes, both sides' armies were shown patrolling semi-vacant streets. Unlike the French, several times the soldiers seemed uncomfortable being videotaped, one-shot includes a government soldier pointing his firearm directly into the camera. Thus, visually, the images to which the American public were exposed reinforced the verbal cues that Rwanda was not a genocide, but a civil war, where people died from random tribal purges and fled to neighboring countries. As with the verbal

content there wasn't any sustained visual images which guided the public into believing the event was worthy of American help or attention.

Overall then, television coverage of this portion of the crisis was minimalist in nature – brief reports on the civil war, no distinction made between the civil war and genocide, and no explanations given for why any of the violence was taking place. Neither were there sustained images to provoke a wave of empathy strong enough to trigger an American intervention. These patterns of news reporting can be interpreted as a 'baseline' of news coverage, representing the normal construction of event reporting when the CNN Effect does not take place.

**News Coverage of the Refugee Crisis.** As was expected, television coverage of the refugee crisis is remarkably different than that of the genocide. Although there are fewer stories – 19 compared to 48 – the total amount of coverage rises to 42 minutes, with most of them lasting around two minutes apiece. Further, rather than the blurb format, the majority of the stories were thematic, focusing on both on the refugees and the American role in dealing with the crises. Both the verbal and visual elements follow the patterns established in the propositions. Unlike those of a few months earlier, news stories emerging from the region were dominated both by human interest stories and numerous visual images depicting the horrors of the refugee camps. Something that is predicted by the propositions.

Substantively, network news coverage of the refugee crisis contains numerous verbal elements assumed to create empathy within the viewing audience. Unlike the genocide, this portion of the crisis was described in more emotive terms, with adjectives ranging from "human tragedy," "human misery," and "complete breakdown of law and order," to the description of Goma as "a city of despair." Similarly, the frames used to structure the stories take on more sympathetic overtones than when used during the genocide.

The Civilian Effects frame dominated the coverage, focusing mainly on the refugees. Initially, the stories were intimately tied to the civil war. The massive refugee flow was seen as the result of the RPF victory at the beginning of July. They were portrayed as victims fleeing certain death by the rebels; retribution was framed as being singled out as Hutu not at punishment for taking part in the newly ended genocide. Early on, Barry Peters succinctly describes the situation: “This maybe Rwanda's greatest and final wave of refugees -- hundreds of thousands fleeing toward Zaire, running for their lives.<sup>61</sup>” Dr. Barb Arnot continues, “Along every road, bodies of the deadline on the ground, some tossed into piles, children watching other children died. The fastest, biggest refugee exodus in history has spun out of control.<sup>62</sup>” All of the reports focus in on the crowding, lack of sanitation, fights for scarce food, and the cholera outbreak painting the picture that the area was chaotic mess needing outside intervention to bring the situation under control.

Subsequent stories detailing the conditions facing the refugees combine the Civilian Effects and State of the Situation frames. Numerous aid workers are shown testifying to the catastrophic nature of the refugee flow. Dr. Jeannik Dami of the International Red Cross notes on July 18, “and the people, there has to be feed, these people need water... and for sure it will be some deaths, a lot of deaths.<sup>63</sup>” The next night, Nina Winqvist attempts to put the enormity of the situation into perspective, stating “we can't cope with it. It's one million people. Think about that. It's like a-a small city in itself, but a city without any kind of services, with the lack of basically everything.<sup>64</sup>” A few weeks later, when the cholera epidemic was reaching its zenith, Red Cross physician Keith Miller muses, “Today's been a bad day. It's been my 10th day

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<sup>61</sup> Barry Peters, “Thousands of Refugees an Hour Pour Out Of Rwanda, Causing Tide of Human Misery,” *CBS Evening News*, July 14, 1994.

<sup>62</sup> “Thousands of Refugees an Hour Pour Out Of Rwanda, Causing Tide of Human Misery,” *CBS Evening News*, July 14, 1994.

<sup>63</sup> Jeannik Dami, *NBC Nightly News*, July 18, 1994

<sup>64</sup> Nina Winqvist, “Rwandan Rebels Swear in New Government, Call on Refugees to Return Home,” *CBS Evening News*, July 19, 1994.

straight, and I thought I was going fine, this afternoon... I just became irritable and I know tomorrow I'm going to have a day off... I've had enough.<sup>65</sup> Unfortunately, as this story, in along with the others proceeding it, informed viewers, the refugees had no 'day off.' Their existence is reduced to searching for food, water, a place to sleep, and watching their loved ones die from the numerous diseases stocking the camps.

While the Goma camps dominated coverage of the refugee crisis, a few stories cover the repatriation of those refugees returning back to Rwanda. Although their numbers were few in comparison to those choosing to remain in Zaire, the news reports showed that these individuals faced hardships of their own. Following one returning group, ABC's Sheila Mac Vicar laments:

It's a long way when you are for aid your mother is dead in the camps in Zaire; when you have to carry everything you own -- your bag, your food, your cooking pots and sometimes, your babies. For people who have endured so much, this is one more trial. And so they walk; whole villages together, great extended families, are only the few who have survived.<sup>66</sup>

More so than coverage of the camps, the stories chronicling the refugees' return tend to be more personal, focusing on the trials of individuals. Most are shown traveling by foot, exhausted by the long journey, commenting on their desire to return home. Other reports showed not only the devastation of the countryside, but also the destruction of the refugees' homes. One couple, upon their return, found their house standing, but everything within had been stolen. Their fields had been plundered as well.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Keith Miller, "Higher Estimated Death Toll for Rwandan Refugees Released Today; Tipper Gore Offers Her Help at Camps," *CBS Evening News*, August 8, 1994.

<sup>66</sup> Sheila Mac Vicar, "Rwandan Refugees Find Hard Journey Back to Rwanda," *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, August 3, 1994.

<sup>67</sup> *NBC Nightly News*, July 27, 1994; "Rwandan Refugees Trickling Home," *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, August 1, 1994; "Rwandan Refugees," *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, August 3, 1994; *NBC Nightly News*, August 4, 1994.

While the refugees were the main subjects of the crisis, of equal emphasis in network news coverage was the role the United States played in aiding the denizens of the Goma camps. The Rwandan refugee crisis was highly Americanized, especially by the end of the crisis' media coverage. Over 50% of the stories discussed every aspect of American efforts in Goma. Interspersed throughout the reports are comments by American aid workers about the horrible conditions of the camps. One story, aired by NBC on July 22 is devoted to the American release effort, going into detail about the massive amounts of aid donated by the US and how that aid would arrive in Zaire.<sup>68</sup> Given the inclusion of the Armed Forces, several stories chronicled the actions of American soldiers participating in the round-the-clock airlift operating at the Goma airport. Individual soldiers are seen commenting both on how horrible the situation is and how glad they are to be helping out. During a report about the enlargement efforts at Goma airport, Lt. Col. Roger Edwards comments, "The folks here are in dire need of some help, and it makes me feel good that we are here, here to help these folks out."<sup>69</sup> A few days later, Sergeant Glen Lee comments, "I just think that my family could be in the same place that they're [the refugees] in right now."<sup>70</sup> One of the most obvious American stories aired on August 8 by CBS. The 2-minute story was entirely devoted to Vice President Gore's wife Tipper, and her activities helping doctors in the refugee camps.<sup>71</sup>

The visuals in the news story complement the subject frames. The coverage is dominated by civilian images, with 282 out of a total of 435 images, or 65%, of Rwandan refugees. Again, the bias towards the Goma refugee camps is present, with 221 or 51% of the total visuals. As is expected in proposition two, the camp footage documents the horrendous conditions of the camps, tying into the Civilian Effects frame. Almost every story early on during the crisis

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<sup>68</sup> *NBC Nightly News*, July 22, 1994.

<sup>69</sup> Lt. Col. Roger Edwards, *NBC Nightly News*, July 28, 1994.

<sup>70</sup> Sergeant Glen Lee, "Relief Workers Overwhelmed, Attempt to Provide Comfort to Stricken Rwandans," *CBS Evening News*, August 5, 1994.

<sup>71</sup> "Higher Estimated Death Toll for Rwandan Refugees Released Today; Tipper Gore Offers Her Help at Camps," *CBS Evening News*, August 8, 1994.

contained an aerial view of the camps. Refugees filled the entire screen, attempting to find room for hastily erected shelters, the entire shot almost obscured by the smoke of fires. Also included were numerous images of individuals and smaller groups trying to go about their daily business of living: cooking over small, smoky fires, gathering firewood, washing clothes, filling containers with water. Dispelling the image of normalcy, however, were their blank faces, impenetrable crowds of the distance, and the yells and cries of their fellow refugees in the background. Equally depressing were the faces of the dead, the sick, the dying. Footage of the cholera epidemic transmitted images of chaotic hospitals -- they're lying on the ground surrounded by grieving families and stressed aid workers, infants and children so sick that could barely move. Finally, just like coverage of the genocide, the dead in the camps were shown to be treated as ignobly. Due to massive death rates, individual funerals proved impossible. Instead, the massive burial pits were shown, complete with masked aid workers and bulldozers to fill the trenches once they were full. The sheer misery evoked by the film from the camps also reinforces the Situation is out of Control story frame.

Also prominent were images of aid workers and the military. Unlike the genocide coverage, western aid workers were present in many of the camp stories. Overall, they comprise 67 separate images, about 15% of the total visuals. Many are shown on screen testifying to the scope of the misery and the lack of supplies, as well as trying to care for the sick and wounded. As with the story frames the American angle is represented in the visuals. Military images constituted 12% of the total images, of 51 separate shots. Of these 51 images over half of them were of the US military. American servicemen were shown carrying unloading cargo planes at the Goma and Entebbe airports, delivering aid at the camps, and interacting with children. Also shown were several individual soldiers, commenting on how they are glad to be in the area helping the refugees.

## Discussion of Findings.

The study's first proposition centers on the verbal content of television reports during a humanitarian crisis. When the CNN Effect takes place, coverage of the humanitarian crisis is dominated by human interest stories, which are designed to evoke empathy within the viewing public. Moreover, Proposition Two argues that television coverage of the crisis will be dominated by visual images of civilian victims, again evoking empathy by the public. Content analysis of television news coverage of the Rwandan crisis from April – August 1994 indicates both differences and similarities between the genocide/civil war and refugee phases.

Comparison of reporting between the two events indicates support for the first proposition, concerning the evocative nature of the storylines. News reports of the Rwandan genocide were largely impersonal. Presented by studio anchors, the stories were told from the '3<sup>rd</sup> person' perspective. The majority of these reports utilized the Conflict frame, and were little more than brief updates of the civil war. Neither the genocide nor its victims garnered in-depth coverage. As indicated expected, however, television reports of the Rwandan refugee crisis were substantively richer. Most stories during this period contain the first-hand accounts of reporters in the area. Making use of the Civilian Effects frame, many stories chronicle the devastation and misery of the refugee camps in Goma, Zaire, along with the efforts of the international aid community to alleviate the refugees' suffering. Also prominent are stories covering the American response to the crisis, with reports of detailing the military deployment and soldier's actions on the ground.

Comparison of the visuals also indicates support for Proposition Two. As noted earlier, almost three-quarters of television coverage on the genocide contained no visuals. Moreover, the visual images that accompanied the occasional report focused more on the fighting, rather than

civilian victims of the fighting. In line with the proposition, however, network news coverage of the refugee crisis was dominated by civilian images. The overwhelming majority of visuals in the reports sampled were of civilians, their horrendous living conditions, the threats they faced, and/or their rescue by the international community. More importantly, these images were constantly repeated over a several week period, again, important when conveying the sense of immediacy that surrounds a crisis situation.<sup>72</sup>

The analysis, however, fails to support the second part of Proposition One. The latter half of the proposition argues that during the CNN Effect, television reports will present arguments for intervention by the American government. Both phases of coverage are similar in the absence of overt opinion regarding policies to solve the crisis. During the genocide, there weren't any arguments supporting the American non-intervention policy, nor were there any direct exhortations for American intervention during the refugee crisis. One explanation for this finding is the objectivity norm present in American journalism. Reporters might have strong opinions regarding intervention amongst during both parts of the crisis, yet professionalism restrained them from expressing their opinions.

Conversely, it may be that the assumption about the need for intervention arguments is incorrect. The number/directionality of verbal statements may not foster public attitudes regarding intervention. Rather, it may be that visual images carry more power than verbal arguments, especially when the media are trying to influence public sentiment regarding the intervention. If this is true, then assumptions regarding the verbal content message may be invalid as well. Efforts to validate the theory may owe their failure to lack of understanding about the mechanics of the Effect, rather than non-existence of the theory. Unfortunately, testing this is beyond the scope of this study, but is an avenue of research for future studies on the topic.

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<sup>72</sup> Moeller, "Compassion Fatigue."

## Conclusion

An emerging area of scholarship within international relations is the power mass media exert over publics and policymakers. One of the standard theories utilized by scholars is the CNN Effect. This theory assumes that, when covering humanitarian crises, the media place the event on the administration's policy agenda. Moreover, the dramatic nature of the coverage draws public attention to the crisis, and this public awareness is seen as also influencing government policymaking. Despite the increased interest in the topic, however, little concrete evidence of a direct media effect on policy makers (or indirectly via public opinion) has thus far been uncovered. A shortcoming in this body of literature has been the lack of attention given to story content and visuals. This exploratory study sought to examine the patterns of television news coverage during a humanitarian crisis when the effect had taken place.

It was proposed that coverage during these situations would differ from non-CNN Effect events, with coverage during Effect periods designed to evoke empathy with the audience. Content analysis on network television coverage the Rwandan genocide and refugee crisis did indicate these different patterns of coverage. Stories broadcast when the CNN Effect is non-operative (the genocide phase) tended to be impersonal and shorter in duration. In contrast, stories aired when the CNN Effect was operative (the refugee crisis) were both longer and centered on the circumstances of innocent civilians. There also were a far greater number of accompanying visuals in stories of the refugee crisis than of the genocide. Moreover, the majority of these images were indeed of civilians in desperate circumstances, seemingly reinforcing the underlying message of crisis and the necessity of outside intervention.

As noted at the end of the last section, however, analysis of these stories failed to indicate the presence of arguments for or against intervention. This finding is troubling, as the verbal

information in a story is assumed to aid the audience in decoding the accompanying visuals. Because the power of the story lies in its persuasive message, the lack of one in coverage during a CNN Effect calls into question one of the assumptions of the theory. It also raises the question over the role of visuals. Are they stronger than previously realized? Is the Effect centered on the visuals, or is there an interaction between the images and some unspecified exogenous variable?

Since this is an exploratory study, these findings should obviously be viewed with caution. Several limitations preclude any larger generalization of the findings. The first is sample size. Although this analysis looks at instances where the CNN Effect was both present and absent, they both come from a single, larger crisis. Also limited was the number of news stories – a sample of 72 stories rather than the universe of over 200 stories was examined. Finally, other studies should use a more rigorous means of content analysis, with several coders and measures of reliability. Only then could more generalizable conclusions about the role of visuals in humanitarian crises be reached. However, the analysis at hand does raise tantalizing questions about the role visual images play when viewers decode the information presented in a network newscast.

## Appendix A: Coding Information on Television Coverage

### I. For each paragraph of the story, determine:

1. Is the story episodic or thematic? An episodic story focuses on specific events, while thematic stories focus on background information or policies related to a political event. For example, episodic stories may highlight the plight of famine and genocide victims, while thematic stories might focus more on the policy vacuum and the need for action.
2. What categories can the story be placed in?
  - Overall State of the Situation: The story describes the overall 'health' of the crises. This category can be further subdivided into three sub-categories: (1) the situation as one that is out of control, and there is a need for action, (2) the situation is out of control, but nothing can be done about it, (3) the situation is under control. Note: the story will not say this directly in the newscast; rather, it will be implied in the story.
  - Military Conflict: The story covers a conflict in the country by reporting on instances of combat. In this situation, the combatants may be domestic, American and/or international forces.
  - Civilian Effects of the Conflict: In this instance, the story covers civilians in the conflict/crisis, and the problems of hunger, disease, death, and starvation they face as a result of the conflict.
  - American Situation: The story focuses solely American opinion, actions, or policies dealing with the crisis.
  - Policy Aspect: This story highlights political policies regarding the humanitarian crisis. Such policies include those which contributed to the famine or genocide, proposed actions to solve the ongoing crisis, or criticism of policies that may prevent a solution to the crisis. The policy aspect may also comprise the analysis component of the story, where the news anchors discuss the situation with reporters on the scene or other authorities on the subject.

### III. Directionality of the News Story

1. Based on the content of the entire story, decide if:
  - The report is favorable to, against, neutral, or not applicable regarding potential US involvement in the famine or genocide.
  - The report is favorable to, against, neutral, or not applicable regarding current US policy regarding the famine or genocide.

### IV. Visuals:

1. For each story, list the number of times images of civilian victims, aid workers, military personnel, military equipment, combat scenes, anchors or reporters, or government officials (domestic and international) were featured in the story.