

The Media and the Rwanda Genocide
A symposium hosted by the
School of Journalism and Communication
Carleton University, Ottawa
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Opening

Opening by Symposium Chair, Allan Thompson, Assistant Professor, School of Journalism and Communication, Carleton University

Allan Thompson: Good morning ladies and gentleman. Welcome to Carleton University, and to this symposium “The Media and the Rwanda Genocide”. Just a few weeks before the 10th anniversary of the Rwanda genocide, we have set out to explore both the international media coverage of the genocide, and the role played by domestic media in Rwanda. We will also examine the issue of media intervention before, during and after such a conflict. My name is Allan Thompson. I’m an Assistant Professor in the Journalism faculty here at Carleton, and I will be acting as the chair of this symposium.

It is fitting that Canada’s premier School of Journalism and Communication, here at Carleton, should play host to an event of this magnitude. Journalism has been central to Carleton’s mission since the university’s earliest days. Today, the school has nearly 900 undergraduate and graduate students majoring in its Journalism and Mass Communications Programs. What better place to gather for a serious debate about the role of the news media in the cataclysmic events in Rwanda in 1994.

Romeo Dallaire, who will deliver this morning’s keynote address, subtitled his memoir “The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda”. What part did the news media play in that failure? At every turn it seems, we return to a troubling equation, an equation that implicates the news media, both within Rwanda and internationally, in the genocide. The issue of hate media in Rwanda has drawn considerable attention, and it has become almost a truism by now to state that the international media missed the story in Rwanda, and yet these two sides of the media equation have rarely been examined in tandem.

Today, we bring together all of the main players in this discussion, gathered in one place for the first time. This symposium involves not only the people in this hall. Others are seated in an overflow room upstairs, and around the world scores more are participating through a live webcast on the symposium website. Notably, the webcast is being monitored by students and faculty at the School of Journalism and Communication at the National University of Rwanda, in Butare. In addition, today’s proceedings are being recorded for broadcast by CPAC, Canada’s political channel, and arrangements are already being made for the publication of an edited volume of the papers presented during this symposium. I would also like to draw to your attention in your program a

copy of a statement to the symposium from the Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan.

We have a full day ahead of us, and difficult issues to confront. While the world stood by, the Rwanda genocide claimed the lives of an estimated 800,000 people in the space of 100 days. It's widely held that most international news organizations initially misunderstood the nature of the killing in Rwanda. On the night that the Rwanda genocide began, April 6, 1994, many television views in the west were transfixed by another event; live television coverage of actor, O.J. Simpson, riding in his Bronco, away from his Brentwood home. There is some debate whether or not more informed and comprehensive coverage of the Rwanda genocide might have mitigated or even halted the killing by sparking an international outcry. Some have asked, "Did the western media's failure to report adequately on the genocide possibly contribute to international indifference, and hence the crime itself?" And there is abundant evidence that within Rwanda, hate radio broadcasts were instrumental in fanning the flames, and implicating ordinary people in the extermination campaign.

When does journalism become genocide? How should we respond to the drumbeat of hate media? How do we navigate the grey zone of media intervention without violating cherished principles of freedom of expression? The objective of this symposium is to examine the historical experience of the Rwanda genocide as part of a broader discussion of the role of the news media in conflict prevention or resolution.

Before I introduce our keynote speaker, I would like to give you a very quick preview of the day ahead. The full details, complete with biographies of all of the panelists are included in the program. Panel 1 will examine the role of hate media in Rwanda. Panel 2 will expose in detail the Rwanda tribunal's recent landmark verdict in the medial trial. After lunch, we will switch to the other side of the equation, and turn our attention to international media coverage of the genocide. Panel 3 will feature leading journalists, who reported daily on the horror of the genocide, and others who have analyzed the impact of western media coverage. Finally, Panel 4 will confront the way forward, and the complicated question of media intervention.

I will remind you of this later, but don't forget lunch will be served at 1:00 p.m. in the Fresh Food Company Buffet in the residence commons. If anyone needs assistance to find their way through the tunnels or above ground, look for someone with a volunteer tag.

At the end of the day, there will be a reception upstairs in the upper foyer, and I would also like to draw to your attention in the upper foyer a number of books about the genocide are on sale. All of these books including General Dallaire's "Shake Hands with the Devil" are being sold at a special discount for this event. The upper foyer also features an exhibit by Toronto artist Gertrude Kearns, so I would again draw it to your attention.

This event was made possible by generous contributions from the International

Development Research Centre and the government of Canada through the Global Issues Bureau of the Foreign Affairs Department, and the Canadian International Development Agency. I would like to thank Foreign Affairs Minister, Bill Graham, who hosted a special reception last evening on Parliament Hill for all of our panelists. I would also like to thank Professor Chris Dornan, Director of the School of Journalism and Dean Katherine Graham, Dean of the Faculty of Public Affairs and Management, for their support. This event could not have come together without hours and hours of work by our Logistics Coordinator Claire Fitzpatrick, our Registrar Nancy Huang, Computer Technician Roger Martin, and Heba Aly, who headed our team of student volunteers. Many other members of the staff here at Carleton helped to pull this event together, and for this I thank them.

I thank particularly the panelists, who are joining us here today. This is a virtual who's who on the question of Rwanda and the media, and many people have traveled a great distance to be with us, and we're privileged to have them here. We have also invited two of the faculty members from the School of Journalism in Rwanda, Jean Pierre Gatsinzi and Ines Mpambara to join us here today so that we can begin to explore how we can work together. And with the help of CIDA and IDRC, we have arranged for a delegation of leading African journalists to travel to Ottawa to participate in this event, and those journalists come, in addition to Rwanda, from Burundi, Sierra Leone, Cameroon and Congo.

Without further delay, I would like to introduce our keynote speaker this morning, a man who has given his strong moral support to this event. Lt-Gen Romeo Dallaire. General Dallaire is one of those people, who needs no introduction, but richly deserves one anyway. His military colleagues still call him "the general". Friends call him Romeo, and others, they just call, and call, and call, hoping to get him on the phone. Even before the publication of his best selling memoir "Shake Hands with the Devil", General Dallaire was one of Canada's most sought after public speakers. He served as an advisor to CIDA on war-affected children, as well as a consultant to the Canadian military and the Veterans Affairs department, and of course, he has his new life as a best selling author. In fact, he's already talking about his second book on conflict resolution. He begins work on that project this fall as a research fellow at Harvard University's prestigious Carr Center for Human Rights Policy. We are honored to have him with us today.

As the world returns it's gaze to Rwanda, however briefly, Romeo Dallaire still stands front and center. In some ways, it is as if he never left. His personal story has now become almost the stuff of legend, but in the context of this event, the outline bears repeating.

A career officer in the Canadian army, General Dallaire went to Rwanda in late 1993, and became Force Commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Rwanda (UNAMIR). His friends and family will tell you that the Romeo Dallaire who went off to Africa that fall never returned. His mission was to a postage stamp sized country in a corner of Africa, a place that barely registered on the map before an explosion of brutality. General Dallaire commanded the ill-equipped UN force of 2,500 troops that

was reduced to 450, and left high and dry by the international community. Many of the hundreds of thousands of Rwandans, who were slaughtered huddled in churches for sanctuary. Death squads lobbed in grenades. In their frenzy, killers severed the Achilles' tendon the heels of their victims so they could return and finish the job later. Teachers killed students. Neighbor slaughtered neighbor as local officials helped organize the killing. Months before the genocide, General Dallaire told his superiors at UN Headquarters in New York that there was an informant who claimed the Hutu extremists were plotting mass killing, but General Dallaire was told that it was beyond his mandate to raid arms caches or to intervene. Once the massacres began, his force was left virtually powerless to stop the killing, and his cries for reinforcement and international intervention fell on deaf ears.

After he returned to Canada in mid 1994, there were telltale signs that General Dallaire was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. In April, 2000, he left the Canadian Armed Forces on medical grounds, but he very quickly took on other roles; first as a special advisor to the Canadian International Development Agency on the plight of war-affected children, and throughout, he has remained a tireless advocate for the memory of what happened in Rwanda.

General Dallaire served in Rwanda as a military man, a general, the force commander, and yet he has emerged all of these years later as one of the most important chroniclers of those events. He has also evolved into something of a touchstone, the world's conscience on the question of Rwanda. Sadly, I think General Dallaire's honesty and willingness to lay bare his soul in public has probably resulted in him being typecast by media coverage, and yet he has so much more to contribute.

In the course of promoting this event, I made calls to a number of media organizations. One journalist reacted this way. "Oh Rwanda, 10 years later, how sad, but I can't cover this event. I'm on holiday, but even if I weren't on holiday, I don't think my newspaper would send me anyway. Why don't you try one of the university newspapers or the alternative media." To some degree, the media ambivalence continues, and yet look at the crowd, and look at the number of people who care enough to devote a weekend to this issue, and to hear the message of our keynote speaker.

A couple of months ago when I was reading General Dallaire's book, my little boy, who is a four-year-old asked me, "Who is the man on the cover of that book?" and I struggled for words to try and explain to him who this person was and what he did, and told him this man was a soldier, who served in Rwanda, in a country where there was a war, where people were being hurt, and he tried to help people. And I said some people say that he is a hero, and my son, wide-eyed, turned to me and said, "A super hero". I said, "Yes, yes a super hero." To which he replied, "You mean like Batman!" Hero. I can think of no better word to describe our keynote speaker this morning. General Dallaire, Romeo, we're honored to have you with us today, and I would invite you to deliver the keynote address.