

Anne Chaon, journalist with Agence France Presse and Africa specialist for the network since 1994

Jocelyn Coulon: Thank you very much Steven. I'd now call on Anne Chaon from France Press. She was a correspondent in Rwanda during the genocide. I'd like to call to Anne Chaon, who was there.

Anne Chaon: Since we've been talking about the failure of the press, I would like to be the devil's advocate. We are here in a journalism school. So I would like to explain how we worked as reporters in Rwanda in '94. And by the way, I would like to quote three lines of a report written for the International Press Institute in the year 2000, six years after the genocide, written by Alan Cooperman, who said:

“The media must share the blame for not immediately recognizing the extent of the carnage, and not mobilizing the world attention to it.”

That's my starting point, and we'll try to come back to it. I work out for a press agency, Agence France Press, and starting on April 7, 1994, managed to be present during almost the entire time until the end of the genocide until the end of June, and beyond. One of our first correspondents based in Nairobi, who went immediately to Bujumbura and crossed the borders by car to go to Kigali was Annie Thomas. I asked her to say a few words, and I'll read.

“You asked me if I think about it sometimes. It's much more than that, much more than sometimes. It has become a kind of obsession, because of the event itself, because of the people I met there, victims and killers, because of our inability to describe properly those events during the first few weeks, because of the militia men who with their machetes dripping in blood would come to say how much they loved France. At the beginning, I was in France, I was in Kigali, and I was there, where the President came from in '94. Imagine what Rwanda looked like. I will not explain to Rwandan friends, but for some of you, a few points. There were bombs. There was a civil war. There were hundreds of thousands of people moving on the roads. There were barricades with the drunken militia men, who had machetes and AK 47's, who'd come to get Tutsis, who would ask people for their ID cards, for the press they'd open our cars. They were looking for reporters of Radio France international. Why? Because they spoke French. These militia men didn't listen to the BBC, but to the RFI. If they had found them, this is what they would have done. They also described very simply their position. Hutu majority. Tutsi minority. That's what we worked on reporting everyday, every hour for radio. That was the case of Mark, and we also had certain permanent broadcast.

So in such a situation you had to try and find your position, and you have two faces. So these three months of genocide from April 7 to the beginning of July when the rebels came into Kigali, we were one of the rare media to speak out. Sometimes we were the only international agency. The BBC also stayed almost all the time. RFI was also present all the time, but very few media were there all the time. Why? Well don't forget because you are future reporters, don't forget that the press is a company. They want to

be profitable, and such kind of communication costs a lot of money, especially if you use satellites.

We mentioned the international situation where Rwanda unfolded. There was the siege in Bosnia. There was South Africa, that was organizing its first election. In the United States, they were interested in OJ Simpson. In France we were all concerned by the death of Ayrton Senna the Formula 1 driver. But in April, 1994, the world was more interested in Bosnia than Rwanda. Imagine and remember that the conflict in Bosnia had started in 1992, in ex-Yugoslavia in 1991, that apathy had gained the population. And that's why they weren't interested in Rwanda. Now, would you have wanted the genocide to have lasted two or three years to get as much coverage as in Bosnia? What we saw in France was the same thing as you saw in the United States. There was very little coverage of the genocide. It was the same thing in *Le Monde*. In all of 1994, there were twice as many articles on Bosnia as in Rwanda in *Le Monde*.

Now, how did we work? I checked in our morgue, our archives the use of the word "genocide." For weeks, we used terms, such as massacre, killing, ethnic cleansing, chaos, anarchy, murder, serial murder. It's true that journalists are not experts in genocide. It's true that many of them, of which I was one, arrived in Rwanda with very little knowledge about Rwanda, about the country. So we were very tempted, especially at the beginning to speak of the civil war, to treat these massacres as a perverse effect of the return of a civil war, and to link these massacres to the previous massacres since 1959. By refusing, well not refusing, but not understanding that this was something totally new, that this was not a continuity of massacres, but something new. The first time we used the term "genocide" was April 20 by quoting Human Rights Watch. In the weeks that followed, the word "genocide" was used by the agency only when we could put it in quotes, and by quoting another source. Thanks to Human Rights Watch, Oxfam, Medecins Sans Frontières and others, the reality of the genocide arrived in the press, not thanks to the reporters, but thanks to the NGOs. They're the ones who really opened the door, and we have them to thank. We probably avoided many errors because of these NGOs. So the word "genocide" will become a word that we will use starting on May 25, almost two months afterwards when the Human Rights Commission of the UN finally adopted a resolution to adopt the use of the term genocide to describe the situation in Rwanda. So between April 6 and May 25.

Now retrospectively, we can see our mistake, but the press in France, maybe it's the same elsewhere in the world, continued to be under the syndrome Timisoara. Romania 1989. The discovery of mass graves. "Mass graves" became a forbidden term for years. There were no mass graves. These were the "communal" graves from the neighboring hospital. We made that mistake that time, and the editors in chief with good reason were traumatized by that mistake, so we became too careful, with the language we used. We were afraid to use the word "mass graves," and that is why in Rwanda, we did not use the term "genocide." In Kosovo, we used the term of "genocide," and in East Timor, of course, there were terrible murders, terrible massacres, but it wasn't genocide. So, we afraid of making the same mistake in Rwanda as had happened in Timisoara.

Press is a work in progress. Things change every day. Yes were we too timid, too afraid, but the mistakes continued. In June, the French press became involved en masse in June in Operation Turquoise, and was given the opportunity to access to many zones that were previously restricted, areas where atrocious massacres had occurred, but there again there was too much information. The military landing, the “humanitarian operation,” and in mid July one million Hutus went to Zaire and cholera exploded in the camps. The humanitarian catastrophe overwhelmed the real story of the genocide.

During the spring of 1994, and this is a basic fact to remember, those who wanted to know, knew, details arrived late, I know, but who wanted to know, knew. Reporters were there, not all the time for most of them, but the witnesses came from the country. Agence France Press was always there. BBC was there. Reporters in the field showed their determination they wanted to report, to give a witness of this killing.

So if I had to answer Kuperman, I would say today, “yes we missed the Rwanda genocide, of course we did, but you wrote in 2000 we were writing in 1994. Journalists are not sociologists or historians. History is woven daily before their eyes. Please a bit of indulgence for the reporters.”

Now, reporters were there. Pictures were available. Texts were available. If your reader, if the people you speak to do not want to listen to your story you can't force them to. They just have to turn the button of the BBC, and the editors can refuse to accept your reports. It's up to them to decide whether to use it or not. General Dallaire, you gave a terrific interview to TFN, the very popular French agency. It was broadcast in prime time. For such a channel, it was very courageous. I'm sorry for your troubles. I was very chagrined. The number of people listening went down. . If you don't want to listen, you shut out, you shut your ears. That's what happened in Rwanda. In 1994 the information was available. We say, “oh it's the fault of the United States that didn't want to intervene. It's the fault of the government of France.” But you the public could have done something. When I came in from Rwanda in the summer '94, I went to my little village in eastern France, and the fisherman said, “Oh were you there? Well, don't talk about it any more. We've had enough. We see these terrible pictures at 8:00 p.m. at the time when we're eating, but what can we do? We can't do anything.” And I never spoke to anyone about Rwanda, not until when the International Tribunal called on me three years later to ask me for details. So then I understood that in the meantime, nobody else had wanted to hear from me, and I had forced nobody to listen. Thank you.