



AFRICA'S DEADLIEST CONFLICT

**MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE
HUMANITARIAN DISASTER
IN THE CONGO AND THE
UNITED NATIONS RESPONSE
1997–2008**

**WALTER C. SODERLUND
E. DONALD BRIGGS
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List of Tables and Maps

Tables

- Table 3.1a: Network TV Coverage of the Second Congo War, by Year 53
- Table 3.1b: Network TV Coverage of the Third Congo War, by Year 54
- Table 3.2: Number of Stories Containing Empathy- or Distance-Producing Visuals, 1997-2008 55
- Table 3.3: Evaluation of European and UN Peacekeeping Operations in the Third Congo War, by Year 55
- Table 3.4a: Major Sources and Number of Times Used during the Second Congo War, by Year 56
- Table 3.4b: Major Sources and Number of Times Used during the Third Congo War, by Year 57
- Table 3.5: Use of Positive and Negative Descriptors, 1997-2008 58
- Table 6.1a: *New York Times* Coverage of the Second Congo War, by Type of Content, by Year 125
- Table 6.1b: *New York Times* Coverage of the Third Congo War, by Type of Content, by Year 125
- Table 6.2a: *New York Times* Coverage of the Second Congo War, by Dateline, by Year 126
- Table 6.2b: *New York Times* Coverage of the Third Congo War, by Dateline, by Year 126
- Table 6.3: Number and Percent of Intervention-Supporting and -Discouraging Items during the Third Congo War, by Year 128
- Table 6.4: Percentage of *New York Times* Darfur and Congo Coverage, by Type of Content 129
- Table 6.5: Percentage of *New York Times* Darfur and Congo Coverage, by Dateline 130
- Table 6.6: Percentage of *New York Times* Darfur and Congo Coverage, by Source of Content 131

List of Tables and Maps

Maps

Africa xiii

Democratic Republic of the Congo xiv

Acknowledgements

Africa's Deadliest Conflict is the third in a series of books coming out of the Department of Political Science at the University of Windsor that deal with the complex intersection of humanitarian crisis and the role played by mass media in prodding the international community toward some form of meaningful action. The first of these, *Humanitarian Crises and Intervention* (2008), dealt with ten crises in the post-Cold War period of the 1990s, beginning with Liberia and ending with East Timor, and in between examining such humanitarian disasters as Somalia, Angola, Haiti, and Rwanda. The second, *The Responsibility to Protect in Darfur* (2010), assessed the early impact of the developing "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) norm on the conflict-beset western region of Sudan. Two of the authors of this book, Professors Soderlund and Briggs, in addition to having focused on international intervention in their PhD dissertations written in the 1960s, were co-authors of both these books. In 2008 they enlisted two former students (one now the head of the department) to join them in the current undertaking on the Congo. The result was an interesting combination not only of young and old, but of varying approaches to research, and the process of researching and writing the book has been a rewarding learning experience for all involved.

In bringing this book to fruition, the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, under the leadership of Dean Cecil Houston, and the University of Windsor's research arm, under the leadership of Vice-President Ranjana Bird, have all provided valuable assistance to us along the way, as did students in a graduate course taught by Professors Briggs and Soderlund in the fall of 2009, and one taught by Professor Soderlund in 2011, upon whom were tested a number of our ideas regarding the Congo's woes. Likewise, commentators and audiences at two 2010 paper panel presentations of material dealing with television coverage of the Congo (the Midwest Political Science Association and the Association for Third World Studies) prompted us to sharpen our arguments on a number of

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Windsor, Ontario
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Introduction

In early December 2010, as we were researching the final sections of this book, our local newspaper, *The Windsor Star*, ran a long editorial on the Congo entitled “The Congo’s Plight: A Tragedy without End.” In that editorial a Congolese clergyman was quoted as saying that “populations in the east of the country remain subject to a regime of growing terror and insecurity—violence, massacres, sexual violence and murder are recorded every day.” It was further reported that 15,000 women had been raped in eastern Congo over the previous year, that 36,000 people died every month (roughly the population of a medium-sized Ontario town), and that the total death toll over the past decade approached 5.5 million, with another 2 million displaced from their homes. All this tragedy had been coupled with an ineffectual international response: in the words of *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, “The barbaric civil war being waged there is the most lethal conflict since the Second World War ... Yet no humanitarian crisis generates so little attention per million corpses, or such a pathetic international response” (both as quoted in *Windsor Star*, 2010, Dec. 6: A6). The editorial ended with a question: “Where are the world leaders acknowledging that this horrific crisis needs to be addressed?” Our interest in undertaking this project could not have been stated more clearly.

First published as an essay, “The Coming Anarchy” in 1994, Robert Kaplan’s description of the disintegration of Sierra Leone in the early 1990s presages developments that were to ravage the Congo beginning two years later: “Sierra Leone is a microcosm of what is occurring, albeit in a more tempered and gradual manner, throughout West Africa and much of the underdeveloped world: the withering away of central governments, the rise of tribal and regional domains, the unchecked spread of disease, and the growing pervasiveness of war” (2000: 9). It is now clear that the Congo’s near decade-and-a-half-long humanitarian disaster, like the atrocities in Darfur that took place during some of

Introduction

the same time period, presented a newly “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P)-equipped United Nations with challenges that it failed to address with anything approaching adequate responses. The question as to why this was the case remains. Was the concept of R2P fundamentally flawed or, as Kaplan’s analysis would suggest, were the first two crises that occurred after it had gained acceptance by the international community simply too complex for any international involvement to bring under control?

The answer is a combination of the two explanations, and in the following chapters we hope to traverse in brief the troubled history of the Congo, examine the record of three UN attempts to deal with the fallout of that troubled history, as well as investigate the role of mass media in generating public support in developed nations either to support a UN-led intervention or to lead one authorized by the UN Security Council. Admittedly this is an ambitious a task to undertake within the covers of one volume. Nevertheless, in the following chapters we have attempted to weave together these disparate threads. To neglect any one of them would leave readers with an incomplete appreciation of the magnitude of the task entailed in controlling both inter- and intra-state violence in a country that, if it had ever gained control over all its territory, had clearly lost that control by 1997. In short, the story of why the Congo is mired in a never-ending humanitarian disaster and why the international community has been unable to mitigate that disaster to any meaningful extent does not provide easy answers. Readers should not expect to find in these pages a set of simplistically packaged solutions.

To understand how major US mass media, both television and print, treated the seemingly endless conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and what role they played in the international response, readers need to have background information relating to three major areas.

First, it is important to understand that the Congo is both blessed and cursed. It is blessed with size (the third-largest country in Africa), combined with an abundant range of valuable mineral resources and “more than one-quarter of the continent’s total” supply of water (Williams, 2007: 1033). In turn, since the 1880s it has been cursed by a history of colonial subjugation as brutal as experienced anywhere (Hochschild, 1998); a tribally diverse population that complicates “nation-building” efforts; a chaotic independence process (including a near-fatal involvement in the Cold War), followed by three decades of rule by a corrupt, self-serving dictatorship; not to mention ambitions on the part of various neighbours, if not to poach territory, at least to enrich themselves at the Congo’s expense (see Prunier, 2009).

Introduction

Jason Stearns tells us in his work on the Congo that “the historical legacy weighs heavily on the present” (2011: 330). Thus, chapter 1 is intended first to serve as a primer in Congolese history up to and including the Third Congo War, which started in 2003, drawing connections between the past and present. Second, the chapter gives readers two frameworks—regional analysis and “protracted social conflict” (Azar, 1990)—by which to understand the extremely difficult set of circumstances that coalesced in the Congo in the mid-1990s to create and sustain a horrific set of conflicts.

A second background component, reviewed in chapter 2, is the record of United Nations involvement in the Congo. This involvement began in 1960 at the time of Congolese independence, and it is arguable that had the UN peacekeeping force, Opération des Nations Unies au Congo (ONUC), not been dispatched at that time, the Congo would not have survived the initial tumultuous post-colonial period, or at least not survived with its present borders. For example, Ali Mazrui argues that anarchy nearly destroyed the nascent state and that “it was saved by the United Nations” (1998: 236). Chapter 2 also reviews the aborted UN mission Operation Assurance in 1996, which had been authorized to deal with the Rwandan Hutu refugee crisis in eastern Congo but was never dispatched (see Soderlund et al., 2008: chap. 8). Assessed as well in this chapter are the contributions of the Mission des Nations Unies en République démocratique du Congo (MONUC). The mission was authorized for deployment in 2000 but did not make a real contribution to peacekeeping until 2003, following a serious outbreak of violence in the Ituri region which necessitated the temporary deployment of a French-led European “stabilization force.”

The third necessary background component is reviewed in the first section of chapter 3 and deals with the role of mass media in crisis intervention decision making—the mobilization of public opinion in favour of international intervention, generally thought of in terms of the “CNN effect.” In understanding the role of mass media in this particular conflict, it is important to note that, as was the case with the involvement of the United Nations, US media were interested in the Congo long before the events of 1990s. In 1960, for example, the Congo accounted for over twelve pages of entries in *The New York Times Index*, second only to the United States itself (Berkeley, 2001, Aug. 2: A20). The longevity of the conflict indicates its “intractable” nature and thus brings into play Susan Moeller’s concept of “compassion fatigue” (1999).

The crucial task performed by mass media in engaging public awareness and influencing interpretations of far-off crises is examined through the concepts of *agenda setting* and *framing*, vital components in the

Introduction

shaping of public opinion related to international actions, including the possibility of a military intervention. Also reviewed in this chapter are contemporary evaluations of media coverage of the current conflict in the Congo, which may be said to have been set in motion in 1994 by the large-scale movement of Rwandan Hutu refugees (some of whom were armed and had participated in that country's deadly genocide) into the border region of eastern Congo. The conflict was intensified in 1996 by the continuing cross-border efforts on the part of this group to destabilize the new government of its former homeland. This in turn led to what can best be described as a Rwandan military invasion of the Congo that began in late 1996 and resulted in the overthrow of long-serving dictator Mobutu Sese Seko in early 1997.

Chapter 3 continues with an explanation of the methods used to study and evaluate media coverage. In terms of research questions, we were primarily interested in assessing the cumulative effects of media coverage: (1) was coverage of the Congo sufficient to place the conflict on the policy agenda of foreign policy decision makers? (2) was it sufficient to keep it on that agenda over the long duration of the conflict? and (3) in terms of framing, did it tend to promote or discourage international involvement to bring the violence under control? In addition, we wanted to explore differences in Congo coverage on the part of television and print media as well as to compare Congo coverage with that generated by the crisis in Darfur, which competed for media attention at the same time as the Third Congo War began to take shape in the spring of 2003.

The final section of chapter 3 details US broadcast television news coverage of the conflict on prime-time newscasts on the ABC, CBS, and NBC networks during both the Second and Third Congo Wars. Quantitative data are presented on the performance of the "alerting function" (the number of stories aired) as well as on the nature of how the conflict was framed (the "evaluative function"), the latter based on in-depth examinations of visuals and descriptive language found in stories. Actual descriptive language used in stories with respect to major actors in the conflict, as coded by a panel of professors, is found in the appendix to the book.

Chapters 4 and 5, in turn, examine in detail *New York Times* coverage of the conflict: chapter 4 focuses on the Second Congo War, while chapter 5 deals with the Third. In these chapters conflict framing is analyzed through year-by-year narrative accounts of issues covered, as well as advice given to international decision makers based on important items of news content such as front-page stories, editorials, op-ed articles and letters to the editor, as well as selected news items dealing with ongoing international peacekeeping efforts.

Introduction

Chapter 6 first compares the performance of television and print journalism in covering the two Congo wars, and in so doing adds quantitative data relative to *New York Times* coverage on dimensions such as overall number of stories, type of content, support for international intervention, as well as where and by whom content originated. This quantitative data is combined with the qualitative material from the previous two chapters to give readers an overall evaluation of how adequately the *New York Times* covered the Congo. Congo coverage is then compared with the newspaper's treatment of the Darfur crisis that erupted in 2003 and began to attract significant media attention in 2004 (see Sidahmed, Soderlund, and Briggs, 2010). A range of factors leading to what is clearly lesser media interest in the Congo are reviewed and evaluated.

Chapter 7 offers our insights regarding how the problem-filled Congo peacekeeping experience may have affected the application of developing norms that relate to the international community's response to humanitarian disasters, subsumed under the concept of "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P). Under R2P the international community was tasked with three responsibilities: the *Responsibility to Prevent* massive abuses of human rights, the *Responsibility to React* in instances where a state either cannot or will not protect its population from mass killing, and the *Responsibility to Rebuild* war-torn societies following international intervention, all as brought forward in the 2001 report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS, 2001). We will comment on key aspects of each of these responsibilities, both generally and specifically as to how they applied to the Congo.

As the title of the book indicates, since the waning years of the last century the Congo has been the scene of "Africa's deadliest conflict," a conflict that has caused the greatest loss of life anywhere on earth since the end of the Second World War; unfortunately the deadly violence has not ended (Willis, 2011, Sept. 19). The final chapter provides an overall assessment of how media coverage may have affected the less-than-effective international response to the crisis. Central to this discussion is the idea of the lack of a "will to intervene" and the role of mass media in prodding hesitant governments into meaningful action (see Chalk et al., 2010). The book concludes with a postscript intended to update readers to ongoing developments in the Congo.

Contents

List of Tables and Maps vii

Acknowledgements ix

The Authors xi

Introduction xv

1 The Congo: Understanding the Conflict 1

2 The UN Response: From ONUC to MONUSCO 19

3 Mass Media, Public Awareness, and Television News Coverage
of the Congo 41

4 *New York Times* Framing of the Second Congo War 65

5 *New York Times* Framing of the Third Congo War 91

6 Media Coverage of the Congo Wars: An Overall Assessment 121

7 Peacekeeping in the Age of R2P 141

Conclusion: The Impact of Mass Media on “The Will to Intervene” 159

Postscript: An Update on Events 165

Appendix: Descriptive Language 171

Notes 179

References 195

Index 227