

Tarryn Cooper
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STS390 Project Report
Genocide and Media Non-coverage

Genocide, a lesson we will never learn

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By Tarryn Cooper

Media love sensationalism: violence, death, crime and tragedy. Why is it then that cases of genocide so rarely gain media coverage?

Governments, the media and community alike share the blame for the loss of thousands of innocent lives that go unacknowledged and forgotten without a whisper.

Let's face it. When it comes to coverage of international news, unless it directly affects Australia or involves Australians, it will rarely get a mention. And genocide, well there isn't enough page space, in the whole four pages in the newspaper, or air space, in the five minutes on commercial television, devoted to international news for coverage of this.

What may come as a surprise to many is the extensive list of cases of genocide that have occurred in history that have been left unacknowledged. Among the more familiar is, of course, the Holocaust and, closer to home, 'the stolen generation'¹ in

¹ The Australian Aboriginal population was decimated following European settlement. The 'Stolen Generation' involved the attempted cleansing of the Aboriginal population in which Aboriginal

Australia. Others, unheard of to many, include the Polish and Armenian genocides and genocides that have occurred in Yugoslavia, Cambodia, Algeria, North Korea, Russia, the Congo and Rwanda to name just a few².

To assume that every reader understands genocide would be to assume way too much. Genocide, as stated in the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crime of Genocide, is the systematic and planned extermination of an entire national, racial, political or ethnic group.³ Under International Law, once an act has been identified as genocide, the signatory Governments of the UN Convention must take measures to punish and further prevent genocide being committed.⁴

Philippe Gaillard, who headed the International Committee in the Red Cross mission for the entire duration of the Rwanda genocide, stated genocide as “the complete negation of war. In a war you have rules...you try to respect as far as you can the civilian population...Genocide is the complete negation of these basic rules. There is not one millimetre of humanity in genocide.”⁵

In what resulted in the death of 800,000 Rwandans in the space of just 100 days, the Rwanda genocide saw the fastest rate of killings in the 21st century.⁶ In Rwanda, April 7 1994, Hutu extremists began systematically hunting down and killing moderate

children were taken from their families. In Tasmania, where racially distinct Aboriginal groups existed, Aboriginal population was almost entirely wiped out in the 19th century with only those with mixed blood surviving. It was legal for the settler to shoot natives on the spot.

Genocide in History, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genocides_in_history#Genocides_since_1500, *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, accessed 17/10/05.

² Genocide in History, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genocides_in_history#Genocides_since_1500, *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, accessed 17/10/05.

³ Rubinstein, R.D., (2004), Genocide and historical debate, *History Today*, v54 i4 p36(6)

According to the UN Convention, ‘genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, such as:

- a. Killing members of the group
- b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life designed to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group
- e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group

⁴ Prevent Genocide International, www.preventgenocide.org/law/convention/text.htm#I, accessed 17/10/05

⁵ Interview: Philippe Gaillard, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ghosts/interviews/gaillard.html, *Frontline*, accessed 15/10/05. Interview was conducted on September 12, 2003.

⁶ Timeline, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ghosts/etc/crontax.html, *Frontline*, accessed 31/08/05

Hutu politicians and Tutsi leaders. In the days following this, large-scale massacres targeting civilian Tutsis were carried out in an effort to exterminate the entire Tutsi population⁷. At this time, international governments called for non-intervention and the international community had not heard of word of what was happening until at least three weeks into the violence⁸. The media had failed us and we, the entire population, have failed Rwanda.

Although governments internationally were so reluctant to declare the activities in Rwanda as those of genocide until it was too late, it is blatantly obvious that the violence committed was nothing short of genocide. According to the President of Genocide Watch, Gregory Stanton, genocide develops in eight stages that are “predictable but not inexorable”.⁹ Reflecting on the Rwanda genocide, these stages stand out so distinctively therefore begging the question of why they were ignored by the world back in 1994.

The first is classification whereby the “us” and “them” mentality divides the groups. In Rwanda you are either a Hutus or a Tutsi. This distinction marked the fate of thousands of civilians as the Tutsis were specifically targeted by the Hutu rebels¹⁰. Stated in a newspaper article published in the early stages of the genocide, Tutsis were identified and separated out in the “systematic killing of the Tutsi minority...either they were being hunted and killed or they would starve.”¹¹

The Tutsis were dehumanized throughout the genocide, commonly being referred to as “cockroaches”. This hate propaganda, a form of dehumanization, is a distinct

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Kuperman, A.J., 2003, How the media missed Rwandan genocide, www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/COMM.7.8.03.HTM, accessed 8/09/05

⁹ Genocide, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genocide>, *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, accessed 17/10/05

¹⁰ Ethnic tension in Rwanda is nothing new however it escalated leading up to the beginning of the genocide. Even though both groups are actually very similar as they speak the same language, inhabit the same areas and follow the same traditions there is a very strong sense of resentment and dislike among the two groups so much that they each have an identity cards that classifies them according to their ethnicity.

Rwanda: How the genocide happened, *BBC News*, Last Updated: 01/04/04, www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/1288230.stm, accessed 8/09/05

¹¹ (Newspaper article) Oxfam warning of Rwanda Genocide, Michael Binyon, *The Times* 29/04/04, www.global.factiva.com.ezproxy.uow.edu.au:2048/en/arch/display.asp, accessed 8/09/2005

Due to space constraints I linked ‘identification’, another stage of genocide, with classification. Both are very similar in this specific case as the distinction and therefore identification of the members of the two groups is what led to the genocide. That is, the division between the Hutus and the Tutsis saw the Hutus target those individuals who were found to be Tutsi in ethnicity.

characteristic of genocide. According to the Hutus, these “cockroaches” needed to be “crunched”¹².

Referring to Stanton’s model, “genocide is always organized [as]...Special army units or militias are often trained and armed.” Often, the Rwanda genocide has been portrayed as a “spontaneous, uncontrollable outpouring of ethnic hatred” however the mass killings in Rwanda were carefully planned.¹³ Early organisers included politicians and military officials that wanted to get rid of the Tutsis. They influenced the mobilisation of a 30,000 strong unofficial militia group called the Interahamwe¹⁴ that worked as a strong rebel force in the mass killings of the Tutsis. Archival government documents reveal the Hutu government imported millions of dollars worth of machetes in 1993, those of which were used by the Hutus, to slaughter during the genocide.¹⁵

Polarization is another identifiable stage characterised by certain groups broadcasting “polarizing propaganda”. These “hate groups” do this to arouse the same feelings and emotions among individuals to influence them to adopt the same values and opinions. Gaillard recalls, “Every day, many times a day, [there was] this radio/television [propaganda] which was encouraging people to kill with machetes and screwdrivers.”¹⁶ The Hutus were using the local media to incite hate and violence, influencing them to perform violent acts against the Tutsis.

Extermination is a distinct feature that identifies violence as genocide. The killers refer to the “extermination” of an entire group because they do not believe them to be

¹² The movie, ‘Hotel Rwanda’, produced by Terry George (2005) is based on true events from the 1994 Rwanda genocide. The Tutsis are repeatedly referred to as “cockroaches” by members of the Hutu army and the Hutu rebels throughout the entire film. The beginning begins with an excerpt from a radio clip that broadcast the “cockroaches” must be “crunched”.

¹³ For a more complex explanation of the evidence of the planning of the genocide visit: Ex-Rwandan reveals genocide planning, Mark Doyle, *BBC News* Last Updated 26/03/04, www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3572887.stm, accessed 19/10/05

The editor of this article, Mark Doyle, was a correspondent for the BBC during the Rwanda genocide. For awhile he was the only foreign journalist in Rwanda and he broadcast live what was happening.

¹⁴ Interahamwe means those who attack together. This group consisted solely of Hutus.

Rwanda: How the genocide happened, *BBC News*, Last Updated: 01/04/04, www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/1288230.stm, accessed 8/09/05

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Interview: Philippe Gaillard, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ghosts/interviews/gaillard.html, *Frontline*, accessed 15/10/05. Interview was conducted on September 12, 2003.

fully human. Together, the Hutus aimed to exterminate the entire Tutsi population as they wanted to rid Rwanda of any “cockroaches”.

The last stage of the development of genocide is denial by the perpetrators whereby they refuse to admit they committed any crimes. General Augustin Bizimungu, the man who led the Hutu army, believes he is not guilty of genocide. He refers to his army as a “self-defence” force and stated, “I am a farmer’s son, and I have done no wrong... I know nobody wants to believe me, but what I did as the army chief was right. I protected my people.”¹⁷

The media were needed to influence international intervention to stop the atrocities. However the lack of media coverage and inadequacies in reporting saw the world turn their backs on Rwanda. There was confusion in the early reporting of violent acts as genocide was mistaken for a civil war between two African tribes.¹⁸

Samantha Power, who worked as a freelance journalist in Bosnia at the time of the genocide, reflects on the failings of the media. She recalls, “There was only one major editorial in the *New York Times*, one major editorial in the *Washington Post* for the entire duration of this genocide. These were editorials that lamented the carnage, that

¹⁷ (Newspaper article) Exiled Hutu army leader denies he is guilty of Rwanda genocide, Associated Press 10/09/94, *The Dallas Morning News*,

www.global.factiva.com.ezproxy.uow.edu.au:2048/en/arch/display.asp, accessed 8/09/05

There is no hard evidence that can prove General Augustin Bizimungu took any direct part in the massacres however neither did he do anything to try to stop them. The last quote provided in the article suggests General Augustin Bizimungu has a hate towards the Tutsis that would lead to him committing any vicious crime. (*Or maybe I am making too harsh an assumption*) It reads, “I am an army general, but I do not talk of war, I want to talk peace, but with honour,” he said. “If peace fails, well,” he paused, “I am here to lead the army... That will be a battle which the Tutsis will never forget.”

¹⁸ Stated by Alan J. Kuperman in his article, ‘How the media missed Rwanda genocide’, (2003). To put this comment in context Kuperman wrote, “Rwanda was totally ignored by the international media. When the genocide came, the media coverage largely conveyed the false notion of two ‘tribes’ of African ‘savages’ slaughtering each other...”

In an interview with Samantha Power, conducted on December 16, 2003, published on *Frontline* (accessed 18/10/05), she too expresses this same perspective about the media during the genocide. She also provides reasons why these problems within the media arose although she does not use them as justifications in any sense. She states, “I think a lot of the ignorance reflected in some of those early reports stems from the fact that so few of the reporters who were tasked to cover Rwanda had ever been there before, so they hadn’t developed sources that they could trust. They were very dependent on official proclamations and portrayals.”

To supplement this claim with further evidence of my own research I did a quick search on the database Factiva to compare the amount of newspaper articles published on the Rwanda genocide, for the time period of one year from April 1, 1994, to the amount published on the September 11 attacks, for the time period of one year from September 1, 2000. There was a massive difference between the two and I was not shocked at all about it. The result presented 81 articles on the genocide and 115,184 articles on the September 11 attacks.

used the word ‘genocide’ even to describe the carnage, but that never dared to suggest that the United States be involved in stopping it.”¹⁹ As a result, there was little public pressure in the West for governments to intervene.

“Never again” was said after the Nazis. It was also said after Rwanda.²⁰ If genocide happened again today it is hard to image the world would react or respond any differently. Would the media take a more active role in informing and encouraging intervention to stop the slaughter? I hope so however I highly doubt it.

¹⁹ Power is also the author of, ‘A Problem from Hell’, a book on America’s responses to the major genocides of the 20th Century. For a full transcript of the interview with Samantha Power see: www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ghosts/interviews/power.html

²⁰ “Never again” was said by Michael Sheehan, peacekeeping advisor during the period of the Rwanda genocide, in response to a question asking whether genocide could happen again. For a full transcript of the interview see:

Interview: Michael Sheehan, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ghosts/interviews/sheehan.html, *Frontline*, accessed 19/10/05. Interview was conducted on September 30 and October 1, 2003.

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Rwanda a lesson for us all

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On May 8, 1994 my husband was murdered by the militia in Rwanda, my name was on a list to die the next day. Luckily I escaped and fled to the nearby town, Nyanza.

I have experienced genocide first hand; I would not wish the times I went through on anyone. Those who have lived in fear, for I am one of them, at least deserve to know these horrific crimes will never be repeated.

Grace Mukagabiro Oxfam program co-ordinator in Kigali, Rwanda²¹

Although I agree that the international community did too little too late to intervene in the Rwanda genocide, too much emphasis is placed on the part the media played or, according to the author of 'Genocide, a lesson we will never learn', should have played in stopping the violent crimes.

Yes, the media's role is to inform the public, and in cases of violence, influence international intervention. But there is only so much we can expect journalists and media workers to do. Why would they want to risk their lives to experience cases of genocide first hand when they can use alternate, reliable sources? I would not risk my safety in such an environment so I don't believe it is right to criticise anyone who is not willing to risk theirs.

Frank Devine Sydney, NSW²²

²¹ From her experiences, Grace Mukagabiro, gives a first hand account to give the readers an emotive insight into the way it personally affects its victims. In doing this Grace persuades readers to empathise with her therefore investing in the readers a sense of regret and a desire to act should genocide occur again. Grace Mukagabiro has previously written an opinion piece for *The Daily Telegraph* titled, 'We must be strong on genocide', (12/09/05).

²² Frank Devine insists on reflecting on the Rwanda genocide from both sides of the coin. He attempts to defend the part the media played during the genocide. Statistics from the International Press Institute provide evidence for his viewpoint. They state that 78 journalists were killed in 2004 and, in 2005, 49 journalists have been killed so far. (<http://www.freemedia.at/index.html>, accessed 17/10/05) Frank pushes more of the blame onto the government and the international community. In turn this implies an ignorance of the world, one that will never learn. He fails to realise in times of genocide, journalists and the media are the public's only source of information. The earlier in the development of genocide and the greater the number of reports and media the public receives, the earlier governments will be forced to intervene.

I recently watched the film ‘Hotel Rwanda’, produced by Terry George, and I could not believe the film was based on true events from the 1994 Rwanda genocide. I had no idea of what was involved in genocide prior to seeing the movie. Is this the fault of the media or my own ignorance or both?

The acts committed in genocide are inhumane and horrific. I hope genocide will never happen again but if it, regrettably, does, please infiltrate the news with reports so the world can act together to do as much as they can to stop it. I have learnt my lesson.

Rebekah McBelle Greenhill, SA²³

²³ Rebekah McBelle compliments, ‘Hotel Rwanda’, as the source of her knowledge on genocide and links this to the opinion piece, ‘Genocide, a lesson we will never learn.’ Speaking as a citizen of the public community she expresses a perspective that implies a reliance on second hand sources for information on atrocities of this kind. Further, this perspective conveys that, as a community, we are not informed enough about these issues and more attention should be paid to this by the media.

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Genocide and Media Non-coverage dialogue

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Carlie: I never realised that genocide has happened in so many countries. I don't know if that is because I was too young to take notice or if it has never really been focussed on by the media. Even in modern history in high school we were never really taught that much about genocide, well not that I can remember anyway.

Tarryn: Well either did I. I had no idea until I started studying it. It's unbelievable we can know so little about horrific events where hundreds of thousands of innocent people are killed. I think the majority of people in society would be in the same boat as us.

Carlie: Yeah well the only genocide I have heard a lot about is the Holocaust.

Tarryn: Prior to watching 'Hotel Rwanda' and studying STS390 at university I was the same. To tell you the truth, I didn't even know the proper definition of genocide.

Carlie: I am still confused over what exactly defines an act as genocide because I always thought genocide was the same as mass-murder.

Tarryn: They are both very similar however not every instance of mass murder is necessarily genocide. Mass murder involves killing a large number of people, whereas genocide, by definition, does not always involve actual killing, only acting on a plan to exterminate an ethnic group.²⁴

Carlie: But in the Rwanda genocide, mass murder was involved in the extermination process yeah?

²⁴ Mass Murder, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass_murder, *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, accessed 21/10/05

Tarryn: Yes it was. As I mentioned in my opinion piece, 800,000 Rwandans were killed.

Carlie: That's such a waste of life. I can't believe governments were not intervening as much as they could to try and stop the crime that was occurring. They were even hesitant for so long to even call what was happening genocide. If it is so obvious to us now, especially how you have shown how the genocide developed at each different stage, surely it must have been obvious back then.

Tarryn: According to witness accounts and survivors of the genocide it was blatantly obvious.²⁵ As I mentioned earlier in my article, if the crime committed was labelled genocide then international governments that had signed the UN Convention were required to intervene to prevent any further violence. But governments, especially the U.S government, didn't want to intervene because it wasn't in their interests and they wouldn't get anything out of it. To them, the cost to gain ratio weighed too heavily on the cost side so they were reluctant to help out.²⁶

Carlie: So when did what was happening in Rwanda finally get labelled genocide? And, then, what did governments do to intervene?

Tarryn: Well an interesting chain of events occurred during the genocide that show just how poorly the world responded. Firstly, eight days after the massacres started, U.S and Belgium troops withdrew from the U.N. force. Shortly after this time, it was clear the killings of the Tutsis was part of a systematic plan to exterminate the entire Tutsi population, so Human Rights Watch called on the U.N. Secretary Council to use the word 'genocide'.²⁷

²⁵ In the interview conducted with Philippe Gaillard, he comments on the abandonment of Rwanda by the international community. For a full transcript see:

www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ghosts/interviews/gaillard.html

²⁶ Many newspaper articles published during the genocide state comments from President Clinton on the thought of possible intervention. The article, 'U.N. chief admits failure to halt Rwanda's "genocide"', by Paul Lewis in the New York Times (26/05/94), states that "Clinton listed Rwanda among the world's many bloody conflicts where the interests at stake did not justify the use of U.S. military power."

²⁷ Timeline, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ghosts/etc/crontax.html, *Frontline*, accessed 31/08/05

Carlie: So they called the activities genocide really early on and nothing was done?

Tarryn: Yes that's right. Not only was nothing done, but straight after this, the U.S and the entire U.N Secretary Council voted to withdraw 90% of the peacekeepers in Rwanda. And if that isn't turning your back on a country enough already, the U.S then limited U.S participation in U.N missions and limited support for other nations that hoped to carry out U.N missions.²⁸ It was not until the end of May, over a month after the killings began, that the U.S and U.N finally agreed to send in African U.N forces in the attempt to stop the genocide.²⁹ They didn't arrive until early July and that is when things started to settle. By July 17, the genocide was over as Tutsi forces took over Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, and the Hutu government collapsed.³⁰ It was all too little too late as by now at least 800,000 Rwandans had been killed.

Carlie: Definitely all too late. You mentioned in your article that under the UN Convention those who commit genocide must be punished. Did anyone get punished for what happened?

Tarryn: Genocide is punished under international law. People who commit acts of genocide may be tried in either a national tribunal under domestic law or a formed international tribunal, whose jurisdiction must be recognised by the state or states involved.³¹ I found this really good site that had a list of the main people tried and their sentences however I will quote parts of the summary they provided as it sums it up really well. It reads,

“Rwanda began trials of persons accused of participating in the 1994 genocide in December 1996. Over 120,000 people have been accused of various crimes during the genocide. Many of the persons who were senior government officials during the genocide and are allegedly high-level perpetrators are on trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in Arusha, Tanzania...By January 2000 more than 2,500 people have been tried. Of these, around 370 have been

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Genocide and international crimes in domestic courts, www.preventgenocide.org/punish/domestic/index.htm#rwanda, *Prevent Genocide International*, accessed 20/10/05

sentenced to death, around 800 sentenced to life imprisonment, around 500 acquitted, and the remainder sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. Twenty-two people found guilty of participation in the genocide were executed in public on 24 April 1998.”³²

Although this shows perpetrators are held responsible and punished for their actions, it also shows the amount of people, guilty of genocide, that escape unpunished. Comparing 120,000 punished to the 800,000 killed. Surely, there has to be a lot more people guilty of committing violent acts. There wasn't enough evidence to punish the chief of the Hutu army, General Augustin Bizimungu, of committing any acts of genocide. Now that's saying something.

Carlie: So why didn't you include intervention of punishment in your opinion piece? It really persuades you to criticise the government when you find out all of this information.

Tarryn: Because I was mainly focussing on the genocide theory and the failings of the media to inform and influence intervention in times of genocide.

Carlie: Oh sorry I got us side tracked!

Tarryn: Have you seen 'Hotel Rwanda'? I think it is as close you will get to what happened in Rwanda. The film is what gave me the idea to write about the Rwanda genocide and the lack of media coverage of genocide.

Carlie: Yeah I saw it a couple of weeks ago. Apart from all the killings that left me in shock, the poor innocent people being slaughtered by the Hutu militia, the part that stood out most and really stuck in my head is the media part; the scene where the journalist brings back footage of civilians being killed. Then the owner of the hotel tells the journalist that the footage must be broadcast around the world on the nightly news so that the international community would watch the footage, see how bad conditions are and then do something to help. I remember it so clearly, the journalist replies, "everyone will watch the news mutter how terrible it is in Rwanda and then

³² *ibid.*

turn around and continue to eat their dinner and nothing more will be said.” I just remember hearing that and thinking how true that statement actually is. Like how many people would have done exactly that? I was too young to understand at the time, I was only 9 years old, so I can’t remember even hearing about it, but I bet a huge majority would be guilty of acting that way.

Tarryn: I completely agree. The movie places a lot of emphasis on the lack of response from the world, especially the international governments, to intervene and stop the genocide. I believe everyone who watches it will take a step back to ask themselves how much effort they went to pressure intervention. And when they realise they did little, if anything at all, they tell themselves that if something like this happens again, they will take more notice and react in a way to do their part in stopping it. But as I hinted in the headline, I believe it is a lesson we will not learn. Should it happen again, sure some things would be different but to the extent needed I am not so sure.

Carlie: While I do agree with you I am going to be optimistic and say that the world would react differently and this would make a difference.

Tarryn: Do you think? What makes you think that?

Carlie: Well first of all technology has rapidly advanced in the last decade which would make it easier for the media and governments to transmit information straight from the source. People would be able to watch it on the internet for example. Also I think the governments would have learnt a lesson from Rwanda considering how bad they looked for not intervening sooner. I do think they would be quicker to act today than years ago. Just think about recently with all the aid and funding countries are providing each other with after the natural disasters this year. For example, millions of dollars was raised worldwide for the victims of the Tsunami in Thailand last December/January. And more recently the Australian government handed over \$11 million in aid to the U.S government to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Tarryn: Yeah but think about how much of that is in the national interests of the governments. Australia and the U.S are close allies so of course Howard would give

them money to keep a healthy relationship. And while I acknowledge the technological advances, this enables the potential for instantaneous footage and information to be at the hands of any individual but do you really think many people would use this potential and act to do something to help out? Do you think journalists are now willing to risk their lives for a story? I believe they would still rely on second hand sources and information.

Carlie: You do have a point. Everyone gets so involved with their own lives with what can affect them directly they do forget to think about the events happening outside their own environment. You were right in saying it does start with the media. I do think if the media put great effort into educating and informing people about genocide should it happen again then people would not make the same mistake they did during the Rwanda genocide.

Tarryn: You hit the nail on the spot with what you said about the media but I think we will agree to disagree about the public's response. I just hope your view is more right than mine.

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