

The consequences of propagating an expedient and misleading domestic and internat...

[Parts of the World](#), [European Union](#)



Introduction

The humanitarian disaster in the Darfur region of Sudan has been brutal and persistent but resisted clear understanding of the internal factors that have driven the violence. Violence between the region's nomadic and sedentary tribal groups has resulted in a death toll that some believe reaches into the hundreds of thousands among the region's multi-ethnic tribes. In the modern era, resolving systematic ethnic violence on such a scale is a complex matter requiring substantial political and military international pressure. The content of media coverage from inside Sudan, in the Arab world and throughout the West has done little to improve understanding of the conflict or of the events that have taken place in Darfur over the past decade. Political and ethnic complexities have complicated Sudanese and non-Sudanese Arab coverage of the crisis, while ethnocentric misconceptions and assumptions have colored the superficial and misleading coverage the Western media has devoted to the conflict. It is the aim of this study to assess the effect that editorial policy and practice among domestic and international media have had on public perception and how the media has contributed to the international response.

not distorted, picture of the violence. Worse, indistinct coverage has blurred the political and the humanitarian, confusing the media message and weakening the impact of widespread violence in the region on the international community (IMS & CIHRS, 2009). The non-Sudanese media and Sudanese government-dominated electronic media have typically neglected covering the refugee problem (Ibid). On those occasions when refugees and other victims of the conflict have received media attention, their plight has

often been marginalized by stories in which government officials are primary sources (Ibid). Such politicization “short sells” innocent victims in Darfur, who stand to benefit most from coverage that takes a humanitarian angle. While the Sudanese media has devoted more coverage to the Darfur crisis than other media, the political and ethnic complications that have helped perpetuate the conflict create their own unique problems. Domestic media outlets and journalists have long complained of government censorship, strict media laws that limit editorial freedom, logistical problems created by a war-torn country with areas that are off limits for reporters and the physical intimidation of journalists by rebel and government forces. Government control includes restrictions that prohibit reporters from visiting refugee camps (IMS & CIHRS, 2009). Another dangerous permutation of the constrained media environment in Sudan has been the tendency of journalists, both domestic and international, to accept propaganda not only from the Sudanese government but from the rebel groups as well (Bell, 2005). Under such circumstances, media organizations have been prone to follow the path of least resistance and simply accept official accounts in the absence of more substantive and objective sources of information. This study will examine the phenomenon in which a conciliatory media becomes complicit in the damage wrought by the management of information.

Theme Statements

Government control of media is a common feature of military regimes. In Sudan, the government authorizes journalists to work and controls where reporters may and may not go. Reporters who have tried to skirt government

restrictions and censorship have often been persecuted for trying to undermine national security (IMS & CIHRS, 2009). The result is a subverted media whose ability to produce quality, objective coverage is compromised. The environment has engendered an artificially symbiotic relationship between the Sudanese government and media that has stunted internal coverage of the conflict and disenfranchised its victims.

The Western view of the Darfur crisis has been influenced by a persistently ethnocentric media perspective manipulated by propaganda from both sides. In 2004, The New York Times published a series of stories claiming that genocide was taking place in Darfur. However, the newspaper admitted the impossibility of travel in Darfur, a virtual confession that it has been unable to confirm the truth of the allegations. American media outlets have been accused of attempting to boil the conflict down to a matter of race, in which black Africans have been targeted by the Arab-dominated government despite the fact that many of the Arabs are black (Bell, 2005). The Western media has been largely unsuccessful at interpreting the Darfur conflict through anything but a prism of pan-African violence that relegates Darfur to one of many interminable tribal squabbles rather than a distinct human tragedy with its own causes.

Objective Statements

The primary objective of this dissertation is twofold: to explain the effect of media coverage by the Sudanese and Arab media on a human rights disaster; and to determine how ethnocentric assumptions on the part of the Western media have empowered both government and rebel forces and

politicized coverage of what should have been reported as a human rights crisis.

The Sudanese government's media policies have contributed to a highly speculative atmosphere among otherwise responsible news organizations concerning Darfur. Many unfounded allegations, including charges that weapons of mass destruction have been used, have had dire consequences for Darfur and for Sudan as a whole (Bell, 2005). By seeking to control the flow of media information, the government has unwittingly contributed to a perception that it has engaged in everything from genocidal violence to government-sanctioned slavery (Ibid). The resultant homogenization of Darfur coverage, which is typically accompanied by recitations of unsubstantiated casualty numbers and allegations of atrocities, has desensitized the international media, and the public at large, toward the Darfur crisis. Darfur then is a cautionary tale, a case illustrating the theory that media censorship and persecution are potentially more damaging to the censoring agency than to those it seeks to control.

Research Questions

Has the lack of coverage by Arab media outlets been motivated by ideological factors, such as a

desire among the Arab media to portray Arabs as victims rather than as persecutors and oppressors; and is the humanitarian angle enough to shame Arab editors into bypassing ideological concerns and focusing on what many have come to understand as the key issue?

Dr. Susan Moeller, director of the International Center for Media and the

Public Agenda, said that the media “ will always gravitate toward the largest kill count (and) always speculate (on) the cosmic consequence” (Moeller, 106). If one accepts Moeller’s contention, what are the larger ramifications of Western media coverage in Darfur and its tendency to sensationalize provocative and incendiary details without vigorously pursuing the truth of reports?

Much of the criticism aimed at the Darfur media coverage has focused on a tendency to ignore firsthand accounts of international aid workers from groups such as Medecins Sans Frontieres, whose doctors have worked in the refugee camps. What are the implications for assessing and resolving large-scale humanitarian tragedies arising from internecine conflict if prominent media outlets such as The New York Times overlook firsthand sources because, as journalist and former aid worker Michael Maren points out, their facts “ do not fit the popular story line”? (1994, 32).

Significance of the Study

This study will expand on the understanding of how media interacts with and impacts international humanitarian crises. Today, it is understood that the news media is an active participant in events that drive and give form to civil conflicts. This study will research this phenomenon and draw conclusions about how the Sudanese media, the Arab media and key

Western outlets have furthered political, ethnic and religious misconceptions about the conflict in Darfur. The study will also use the Darfur conflict to draw conclusions about government media censorship and the paradox wherein such control becomes detrimental to the government.

Research Methodology

The research approach adopted in this study will accord with an underlying principle of quantitative content analysis, in which ambiguity of message and unsubstantiated claims in the news stories in question are considered. A quantitative analysis of the media content will be reviewed according to two primary comparison parameters:

Sudanese vs. non-Sudanese (i. e. pan-Arab and Western) coverage

Print vs. electronic media coverage

A thorough review of content will provide a basis upon which to draw substantive conclusions about state-controlled coverage vs. independent media. In particular, research will determine the depth and breadth of coverage devoted to:

Domestic events vs. international developments related to the conflict

The presence/recurrence of stories using Sudanese government officials and representatives as primary sources vs. non-official primary sources

Typical examples of localized events will include the prevalence and nature of internal conflict among both rebel and government-sponsored security forces, and the presence and frequency of Arab vs. non-Arab violence on both sides. Typical international stories will, for example, focus on problems related to the composition of a proposed multi-national peace-

keeping force, or the involvement of other African leaders in resolving the conflict.

Literature Review

The nature of media coverage in Darfur has, on balance, obscured the fact that the region's indigenous tribes are not " ethnically homogenous"

(Schimmer, 26). Coverage, particularly in

the Western media, has tended to frame the situation in straightforward " black-and-white" terms. The benchmark 2009 report analyzing coverage of the conflict found that among Arab and Sudanese media, an overall lack of editorial direction or guidelines has resulted in a patchwork of coverage, in which content and quality vary widely depending on the standards and editorial direction of the particular news organization (IMS & CI&HRS, 2009).

The Sudanese radio network Um Durman claims that objectivity governs its coverage while at the same time insisting that Darfur is a separate issue, one that does not fall within the scope of the network's policy " because it has financial, professional and editorial particularities" according to one representative (Ibid).

Observers have blamed many Western news organizations for lazy coverage, and for neglecting detailed and objective coverage in favor of generic, sweeping statements that claim Africa, as a whole, is a political ruin. This ethnocentric temptation to collectivize all political unrest in Africa hampers efforts to understand civil conflict on a case-by-case basis. " Africa itself has largely failed," New York Times editor Nicholas Kristof wrote in an op-ed piece, concluding that it is " time to rethink this continent" (2003). It makes no more sense to genericize all turmoil in Africa than it does to make uniform

statements about all regional violence in the former Soviet Union.

Consequent public perception tends to take a fatalistic form, in which most concur that the violence is tragic but overwhelming and not worth costly and risky foreign intervention, which is likely to result in another Somalia-type tragedy. Western coverage of the Darfur conflict appears to bear out Dr. Moeller's assertion that, "Reporting the news is both a political and a moral act" (Bell, 2005).

References

- Adeba, Brian. "A Comparative Analysis of the Darfur Conflict in the 'Globe and Mail' and the 'Toronto Star,' 2003-2008." *Canadian Journal of Media Studies*. Vol. 9. September 2011.
- Bell, Martin. "The Media and Darfur: Sensationalism and Irresponsibility." *The European Sudanese Public Affairs Council*. Ed. David Hoile. 2005. <http://www.espac.org/darfur/the-media-and-darfur.asp>.
- Kothari, Ammina. *A Study of the New York Times Coverage of the Darfur, Sudan Conflict, July 2003 – July 2006* (Master of Arts Thesis). Eugene, OR: University of Oregon. 2008.
- Kristof, Nicholas. "What Did You Do During the African Holocaust?" *The New York Times*.
Op-ed piece. 27 May 2003.
- Maren, Michael. "Feeding a Famine." *Forbes Media Critic*. Vol. 2. 1994.

Markusen, Eric. "Three Empirical Investigations of Alleged Genocide in Darfur." Grzyb,

Amanda, ed. *The World and Darfur: International Response to Crimes Against Humanity in Western Sudan*. McGill: Queen's Press.

Moeller, Susan. *Fatigue: How the Media Sell, Disease, Famine War and Death*. New York and London: Routledge. 1999.

"'New York Times on Africa:' A Tradition of Pessimism Continues," News Opinion by Afrol News, 4 June 2003. <http://www.afrol.com/articles>.

Pintak, Lawrence. "Darfur: Covering the 'forgotten' story." *Arab Media & Story*. No. 2. Summer 2007.

"A Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis: Media Coverage of the Darfur Conflict in Sudanese and Non-Sudanese Media." International Media Support, Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies & Amman Community Net. Report. June 2009.

Name 10

Riffe, Daniel, Lacy, Stephen & Fico, Frederick G. *Analyzing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research*. Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. 2005.

Schimmer, Russell. "Tracking the Genocide in Darfur: Population Displacement as Recorded by

Remote Sensing." Yale University Genocide Studies Program, Remote Sensing Project. New Haven, CT: Yale University. 2007.

Shekhdar, Kersap D. " Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Media Coverage of Darfur (But Were Afraid to Ask)," Online Journal, 12 September 2004. <http://onlinejournal.com>.

Stemler, Steve. " An Overview of Content Analysis." Practical Assessment, Research and Evaluation. Vol. 7. 2001.

" UN Could Have Averted Darfur Crisis - MRG." IOL News. 16 October 2006. <http://www.iol.co.za/news/african>.