

Hotel Rwanda – learning from history, not Hollywood

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Jos van Oijen writes about the release of Paul Rusesabagina – the ex-hotelier of ‘Hotel Rwanda’ – from prison in Kigali at end of March. He argues that with very few exceptions, the media use the Hollywood movie, Hotel Rwanda, as factual information. Yet the story is largely fictional. Van Oijen argues that journalists (and many researchers) are as ignorant about genocide today as they were in 1994.



Featured Photograph: Hotel des Milles Collines, Kagali, Rwanda (5 February 2006)

‘If we are ever to have any hope of ending genocide and similar atrocities,’ researcher Kjell Anderson wrote, ‘we must first understand them.’ Anderson’s remark may state the obvious but as history keeps repeating itself, it cannot be said often enough.

In the first week of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, from 7 April 1994 onward, foreign journalists dutifully reported the systematic, one-sided nature of the violence: elite units of the Rwandan army aided by youth militias going from house to house killing unarmed Tutsi civilians; separating groups of people to kill the Tutsi, killing Hutu with a stereotypical Tutsi appearance, etc.

The violence was nevertheless interpreted as chaos, anarchy, and flared-up tribal strife. Such explanations echoed the propaganda of the extremist leaders who washed their hands in innocence by portraying the acts of genocide as random violence committed by angry mobs and disobedient soldiers who escaped their barracks. It was as simple as it was effective. No foreign power wanted to risk its soldiers in yet another chaotic tribal war in Africa. The United Nations pulled out their peacekeeping force and the world averted its

gaze. By the time everyone realized what was taking place, most of the victims were already dead.

Today's journalists know as little about genocide and propaganda as their colleagues in 1994. They are not familiar with the key elements of genocide, are unable to distinguish genocide from traditional warfare, do not recognize subtle forms of genocide denial, and recycle extremist propaganda as 'the other side of the story'. Craft journalism is no longer a priority. Present-day news coverage is a matter of suggestions and emotions, opinions and judgments, political preferences, and activism. Structured research and a rational approach to the evidence, have become the exception rather than the rule. Depictions of historical events in popular culture replace reality, at least with this subject matter.

Hôtel des Mille Collines

"It's truly a shame what happened to the 'Hotel Rwanda' hero," an investigative journalist wrote on Twitter during the controversy surrounding Paul Rusesabagina last year. The tweet referred to a background article on a public broadcaster's website expressing the same sentiment. It caught my attention, not because it was stitched together from unverified assumptions and emotions, but because it mixed up the chronology of historical events even more than usual.

The law of cause and effect had apparently gotten in the way of a good story, so the sequence of events was adjusted instead of the

narrative. In science fiction, the timeline is frequently manipulated as well, but in those cases, the hero will spend the rest of the story desperately trying to correct the unforeseen consequences. In the real world, there are consequences too, but when it affects the lives of ordinary people in faraway Africa, as in this case, nobody loses sleep over it.

To journalists, history does not exist. Only the movie exists. *Hotel Rwanda*, a 2004 Hollywood film, runs for two hours, long enough to internalize the message displayed at the start: 'This is a true story'. Ironically, the scene that follows is entirely fictional, but it convinced most journalists that the movie was a historically accurate documentary. It demonstrates the magic of Hollywood as well as the gullibility of (not only) journalists.

What matters is not the facts but the beautiful actress Sophie Okonedo who says, in a romantic scene in the film set in South Africa, by candlelight and with a glass of wine, to her handsome co-star Don Cheadle: "You are a very good man, Paul Rusesabagina". A true story. One that happened in Johannesburg ten years after the genocide but when you're in a dark movie theatre, participating in the shared experience of a cinematic illusion, you don't think like that. It feels real, therefore it is true.

To the chagrin of many, the rescued hotel guests contradicted the illusory truth projected on the screen. The 'ungrateful' extras of the hero story remind us of the fact that the hotel manager was an actual person, not Don Cheadle in the movie, but a man of flesh and blood whose character traits included some unpleasant ones. The survivors

were joined in their criticism of the film by other witnesses such as Romeo Dallaire, the commander of a few hundred UN peacekeepers in Rwanda who refused to abandon the mission. Some of these men were stationed in the hotel at the time.

The facts are documented. They were reported by experienced war correspondents. Dallaire described them in his situation reports. Correspondence has been preserved. There is too much to mention and verifying the information requires little effort. On 15 May 1994, for instance, journalist Mark Huband reported in *The Observer* that the hotel manager ‘threatened to throw his guests out, because they have not paid any bills’. Other newspaper articles mentioned the real heroes: the small group of peacekeepers and United Nations military observers who camped out in the lobby.

However, the media did not respond to reason. Oblivious to the paradox in their argument, they speculated that the criticism was a smear campaign organized by the Rwandan government. This assumption overlooked the fact that the information of the witnesses already existed before the film, a fact that excludes the possibility of the information being generated, for whatever purpose, after the film premiered in 2004. Even today, the international media collectively recycle the irrational assumption that 19 years ago served to retain a false belief. In the minds of these journalists, the history of 1994 still begins and ends in 2004.

The irrational accusation levelled against the former hotel guests is more than just an insult to the people concerned. It shows that

the members of the media who suspended reality in 2004 to accommodate a Hollywood script have yet to return to earth. Another consequence of the knee-jerk reaction of ‘ulterior motives’ to rationalize the information of the survivors is that it has become the default attitude whenever a journalist is confronted with substantiated criticism. I will provide a few examples of this behaviour from my own experience. Again, note the blunders with chronology and causality.

Some events

On 7 September, 2021, I published a review of the book ‘Do Not Disturb’ by British journalist Michela Wrong. She responded in a South African newspaper on 18 July, 2021. That’s right: seven weeks earlier. I had not written a single word yet, but Wrong already claimed that my review was ‘part of a very efficient state propaganda campaign’ of the Rwandan government. The journalist who interviewed Wrong did not question the accuracy of her accusation, published it, and afterwards resisted the reality that the review did not exist and that my work concerns the facts of history, not contemporary politics. I was forced to lodge a complaint with the South African Press Council to be granted a rebuttal.

In the Netherlands, we have media watchdogs too, but their attitudes are more like Wrong’s and that of the Hotel Rwandafans, than their African colleagues. A case I submitted to the ombudsman of the Dutch public broadcasters last year, about a pattern of serious ethics violations in programmes re-

lated to the genocide against the Tutsi, was ‘solved’ by replacing the entire case file with an unrelated question I had sent by email two months earlier. As weird as this may sound, more relevant to the discussion of this article is that the written defence of the criticized broadcaster contained no less than twelve accusations of the ‘state propaganda’ kind.

My response to such accusations is always the same: Would it matter? Would the facts change? Facts have no ‘side’; they are what they are. Anyone can look them up and judge for themselves.

But therein lies the problem, apparently. To give alternative histories an appearance of plausibility the facts must change, the chronology of the events must be reversed,

historical footage must be manipulated, official documents must be misrepresented, and fake experts must be presented to confirm the illusory truth. Otherwise, such stories would stop making sense.

And then what? Would these journalists start consulting the archives, reading the academic literature, doing some actual research themselves, and informing themselves about the elements of genocide? Would they learn a few lessons from the past instead of moulding it to fit a false belief? Oh my, what a crazy idea!

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