

**In the post-Cold War era, what has been the media's impact on public perceptions of and governmental responses to genocide?**

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In the post-Cold War era, the United States has witnessed a significant shift in the nature of global conflict. The nuclear and conventional arms race between the U.S. and USSR has largely faded into the background, with the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1991 promising a new chapter of global peace and prosperity. Yet, just a year later, Eastern Europe experienced what would become the first in a troubling series of ethnic cleansings. Our honeymoon with the post-Cold War era had ended. In its place, we are now confronted with a harrowing reality: ethnic genocides emerging as a disturbingly recurrent phenomenon.

In the age of interconnectedness, reporting on these genocides has become more accessible than ever before. At no other point in history has America been so conscious of the global distant other. Intuitively, with heightened awareness of events occurring on the other side of the globe, one might expect a corresponding increase in both awareness and intervention in these atrocities. However, in the context of genocide, this broadening of perspective does not necessarily result in actionable empathy. In fact, the media's true effect on public perceptions and government response to genocide appears to be quite the opposite, as both under-reporting and over-reporting by the media may contribute to apathy among the public and inaction from the government.

In my research of the media's impact on the public and governmental sectors of the United States, it seems there are two philosophies that dominate much of the available literature.

On one side of the spectrum, historians argue that the media has had little to no tangible impact on responses to genocides, apart from raising general awareness. Advocates of this perspective acknowledge and sometimes praise the media for its ability to reach the American public in such great volumes. However, they also draw comparisons between the levels of inaction from the state and the level of reporting in online and print media, in order to illustrate limitations for the medium—that it struggles to create tangible improvements outside of such general awareness.

Conversely, there exists another argument asserting that the media has played a significant and detrimental role in shaping public perceptions and governmental responses to genocide. These historians argue that with the shift towards sensationalism and click-farming in the media, an increasing number of shocking and horrific headlines are being published. Aimed at holding the reader's attention for as long as possible, these articles may have the unintended side effect of misrepresenting the conflict and fostering a sense of public apathy through their coverage. Ultimately, these narratives can generate resistance, at both the public and governmental level, to intervening in current and future genocides.

In navigating such viewpoints, it becomes essential to examine the works of prominent authors from each camp to anchor the discussion of ties between the media and our collective understanding of various genocides. In this historiography, I will analyze Michelle J. Lee's study on the media's influence on humanitarian interventions regarding the Rohingya Genocide<sup>1</sup> as well as Kjell Føllingstad Anderson and Ingjerd Veiden Brakstad's study on how media narratives

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<sup>1</sup> Representative of the first perspective

may actually erode political will and encourage passivity with specific focus on the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides<sup>2</sup>.

Michelle J. Lee is a researcher at Columbia University with a track record of published work in fields ranging from data science to public policy. Since 2021, Lee has published two articles in the prestigious Springer Journal of International Humanitarian Action, both regarding the Rohingya Genocide in Myanmar.<sup>3</sup> Her work, especially that of her first publication in Springer, delves into the Rohingya refugee crisis, focusing on the impact of mass media coverage on public and governmental responses. Consequently, her work represents a very relevant discussion to my research question.

Lee asserts that, despite extensive media attention and diplomatic pressure in the United States, the Rohingya refugee crisis has not seen a significant reduction in the number of Rohingya fleeing Myanmar with refugee status. This conclusion is evidenced by an analysis of the data surrounding the volume of media reporting about the refugee crisis and the number of refugees fleeing the country.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, Lee draws from leading U.S. publications like the New York Times and the Guardian, alongside data on Rohingya refugee numbers from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The study found that, as media reporting on the Rohingya genocide grew exponentially from 2016 to 2017, the number of refugees did not see any improvement whatsoever. In fact, refugee volume increased exponentially as well. This

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<sup>2</sup> Representative of the second perspective

<sup>3</sup> "Michelle J Lee," Google Scholar, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=7yummaYAAAAJ&hl=en>.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle J. Lee, "Media Influence on Humanitarian Interventions: Analysis of the Rohingya Refugee Crisis and International Media Coverage," *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 6, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-021-00108-5>.

trend substantiates the author's claim that media reporting did not effectively reduce the number of Rohingya refugees fleeing Myanmar—a marker of the genocide's severity.

Lee's work holds particular relevance to this paper, as her analysis of the volume of media reporting and the number of Rohingya refugees offers a direct response to the media's influence on responses to genocide. In combination with data to substantiate a heightened public awareness, Lee's work would support the conclusion that media coverage does not have an appreciable impact on governmental intervention despite widespread public empathy.

Though there could be an argument made for the circumstantial correlation between articles on the Rohingya crisis and refugee numbers, in reality, this data limitation actually substantiates Lee's claim. Indeed, if no correlation existed between media coverage of the Rohingya and refugee numbers, this would inherently prove that media attention fails to mold governmental responses to genocide. By highlighting the limitations of media in driving effective humanitarian interventions, Lee's work underscores the need for more than just news reporting to protect the Rohingya population.

Kjell Føllingstad Anderson and Ingjerd Veiden Brakstad, both distinguished scholars in the fields of genocide and human rights studies, present a compelling argument regarding the role of media narratives in shaping public perceptions and governmental responses to these atrocities. Kjell Anderson is an associate professor and a director of the human rights program at the University of Manitoba, as well as an author of twenty-seven journal articles surrounding the fields of human rights, genocide studies, and international criminal law.<sup>5</sup> Ingjerd Brakstad is a

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<sup>5</sup> Kjell Anderson, Dr., "Dr. Kjell Anderson," University of Manitoba, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://umanitoba.ca/law/faculty-staff/kjell-anderson>.

historian and genocide scholar specializing in bystander perceptions of mass violence and human rights violations.<sup>6</sup> During her PhD tenure at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, she published “The Impossibility to Protect? Media Narratives and the Responsibility to Protect” with Dr. Anderson in *Genocide Studies and Prevention*.<sup>7</sup>

Their research challenges the assumption that media coverage necessarily compels action against genocide or advocates for the responsibility to protect those persecuted. Instead, Anderson and Brakstad argue that media narratives may, in fact, foster passivity in response to genocide. Drawing from excerpts taken from international newspapers regarding the Rwandan and Bosnian genocides, they illustrate how these narratives can distance readers from victims through specific language and quantity of coverage—portraying these genocides as inevitable and remote, thereby justifying inaction.<sup>8</sup>

Both Anderson and Brakstad, with their comprehensive expertise in the fields of genocide and human rights studies, represent an invaluable set of perspectives in my research on how media narratives shape public perception of and governmental response to genocide. Their findings provide a detailed explanation of how media representations have perpetuated indifference in the face of mass ethnic cleansings during the 1990s. Comparing the analysis of Anderson and Brakstad to that of Lee will sketch a timeline of how media narratives and their impacts on public and government attitudes have evolved since 1991.

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<sup>6</sup> "Members," Perpetrator Studies Network, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://perpetratorstudies.sites.uu.nl/members/>.

<sup>7</sup> The *Genocide Studies and Prevention* Journal is the official journal of *The International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS)*, a world-renowned organization seeking to further research and education regarding genocide.

<sup>8</sup> Kjell Anderson and Ingjerd Brakstad, "The Impossibility to Protect? Media Narratives and the Responsibility to Protect," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 9, no. 3 (2016), accessed May 6, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.9.3.1331>.

As we explore the intricate relationships between media narratives, public perception, and governmental responses to genocide, it is crucial to not only examine this phenomenon in isolation, but also in the context of its evolution over the past three decades. This more comprehensive approach will consist of a comparative analysis of three time periods: the 1990s, the early 2000s, and the late 2010s. This varied analysis will enable more broadly relevant conclusions about genocide intervention to be drawn.

The Bosnian Genocide, the first in a long series of ethnic atrocities in the post-Cold War era, was the result of complex historical, political, and ethnic tensions that brewed to a climax in the region of former Yugoslavia. From 1945 to 1992, Bosnia was part of this nation consisting of various ethnic groups, from Serbians to Albanians.<sup>9</sup> However, with the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, Croatia and Slovenia declared independence in 1991, setting off a chain reaction that would lead to further fragmentation and conflict. In Bosnia, tensions reached a breaking point when they finally declared independence in April of 1992.

The response from Serbian forces was swift and brutal. They launched an assault on the Bosnian capital, resulting in the deaths of thousands of civilians. This assault marked the beginning of a campaign to "ethnically cleanse" Bosnian territories—an atrocity that would shock the world.

As the first genocide in the post-Cold War era, this atrocity holds particular significance in establishing a benchmark for the U.S. media's influence on both the public and government

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<sup>9</sup> "The Bosnian Genocide," Montreal Holocaust Museum, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://museeholocauste.ca/en/resources-training/the-bosnian-genocide/>.

sectors of America. In 1992, media outlets in the United States artificially elevated the severity of the conflict by over-reporting on the genocide's hopelessness and brutality. While this is not to say that the Bosnian Genocide was insignificant, the focus on sensationalism may have skewed public perception towards hopelessness, ultimately overshadowing hope for any American-mediated resolutions. Furthermore, this media phenomenon was not a scale-dependent issue—it existed on both a city and national level.

As a community newspaper, the Trenton Evening Times serves the city of Trenton and the broader Mercer County, New Jersey area.<sup>10</sup> With an average daily circulation of approximately 77,405 copies<sup>11</sup>, The Times is representative of a typical local newspaper, generally defined by a circulation of 50,000 copies<sup>12</sup>. On August 7, 1992, the Trenton Evening Times published a story titled, “No rescue for Bosnia’s Muslims”—a column reporting on the West’s unwillingness to intervene in the Balkans:

Western leaders look to the Bosnian Muslims to recognize that their cause is hopeless, come to the bargaining table and accept defeat. To drive the point home, they are telling the Muslims to forget dreams of being rescued by Western cavalry.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> NJ.com, The Times of Trenton, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://www.nj.com/times/>.

<sup>11</sup> NJ.com, The Times of Trenton.

<sup>12</sup> Nieman Lab, last modified October 7, 2021, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2021/10/local-news-blues-the-employees-of-small-newspapers-see-a-bleak-future-this-survey-says/#:~:text=Small%20newspapers%2C%20with%20circulations%20under,Center%20for%20Digital%20Journalism%20shows.>

<sup>13</sup> Leslie Gelb, "No Rescue for Bosnia's Muslims," *Trenton Evening Times* (Trenton, NJ), August 7, 1992, 12, America's Historical Newspapers.

This excerpt from the Trenton Evening Times reflects a narrative of resignation and hopelessness concerning Western intervention in the Bosnian Genocide. By incorporating quotes from Western leaders suggesting that Bosnians should “accept defeat” and “forget [their] dreams of being rescued”, the article fosters a sense of inevitability and apathy towards the conflict, implying that Western powers, and the United States by association, have effectively given up on the idea of meaningful intervention.

Furthermore, The Times’ framing may create a sense of futility among readers, as their own beliefs about the conflict are pitted against the expertise of White House foreign policy agents. After all, these White House operatives, privy to a wealth of information far beyond the grasp of ordinary civilians, would logically possess a more nuanced understanding of the situation—thereby wielding more authority in their decision. Consequently, this narrative potentially discourages readers from activism and advocacy efforts, suggesting that rallying support for the Bosnians would be futile in the face of a perceived lost cause. Additionally, the excerpt may contribute to a sense of disillusionment with political leadership and its commitment to responding to urgent global issues. This disillusionment further fosters apathy towards intervention efforts, exacerbating the sense of hopelessness surrounding the conflict.

In the subsequent section of “No rescue for Bosnia’s Muslims”, the article scrutinizes the various goals outlined for the upcoming UN peace talks in London, providing scathing commentary on each objective:

The main aim is to sell the idea of creating safe havens that would be transformed into ethnic cantons, each with considerable autonomy. The effect of such an approach, however, would be to legitimize much of the Serbian conquests in Bosnia. The Bush administration seeks a much narrower focus on the Landon conference — to strengthen humanitarian relief efforts. [...] This will require land convoys, which in turn will require protection. The administration will support giving U.N. relief units some firepower for self-protection, [...] but neither London nor Paris is enthusiastic about that. [...] No U.N. Security Council member seems prepared to cross the line from humanitarian relief to combat. Russia even seems ready to veto proposals to do so. [Furthermore,] Serbian gorillas would soon turn the situation into a quagmire, as they have in years past.<sup>14</sup>

By countering each potential solution to the Bosnian conflict with a detrimental consequence, this excerpt underscores a narrative of how these initiatives, from creating “ethnic cantons” to armed “land convoys”, could exacerbate the suffering of genocide victims and inadvertently legitimize Serbian ethnic cleansings in the region. This cause-and-effect narrative may lead to a mentality, where actions towards peace settlements perpetuate the suffering of the Bosnian people, rather than mitigate it. Consequently, the Bosnian people are portrayed as doomed to suffer cyclically, no matter the United States’ actions, reducing both public and governmental will to intervene.

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<sup>14</sup> Gelb, "No Rescue," 12.

This sense of futility is further compounded by the lingering fear of escalation, particularly in the wake of the recently-concluded Cold War. The specter of disastrous military conflict in Eastern Europe still looms over the American populace. By framing the conflict in terms of “firepower for self-protection”, “land convoys”, and “Serbian guerrilla [fighters]”, the Bosnian Genocide becomes a potential flash-point for military conflict, sowing fear and aversion among the public, discouraging advocacy for government intervention. This climate of apprehension fosters a reluctance to address the root causes of the genocide, entrenching the cycle of violence and displacement within the region.

Unfortunately, this framing of the Bosnian Genocide was not limited to local publications. The Miami Herald, Florida's fifth largest media outlet with twenty-four Pulitzer prizes and an audience of over 1.5 million people, stands as a representative of one of the largest newspapers in the country.<sup>15</sup>

Following the publication of the Trenton Evening Times' commentary on Western reluctance to intervene in the Bosnian Genocide, the Miami Herald featured a page-long spread of transcribed interviews with genocide victims.<sup>16</sup> These interviews, among many conducted with Bosnian refugees, provided harrowing accounts of their ordeal. Notably, the article focused on the experiences of minor victims, aged between fourteen and sixteen, vividly illustrating how

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<sup>15</sup> "About Our Company," Miami Herald, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://www.miamiherald.com/customer-service/about-us/>.

<sup>16</sup> Martha Musgrove, "Serbia's 'rape camps': Evil upon Evil," *Miami Herald* (Miami, FL), December 19, 1992, America's Historical Newspapers.

they were “beaten with clubs”, “ears or noses cut”, “sex organs hacked off”, and “thrown into ovens and burned”.

In contrast to the political lens adopted by the Trenton Evening Times, the Miami Herald chose to convey the conflict through visceral emotion, particularly highlighting the shock and horror evoked by accounts of the abuses suffered by underage Bosnian refugees. With an entire page dedicated to the coverage of these stories, readers may be overwhelmed with the brutality of the Bosnian conflict, thereby promoting helplessness and futility in individual action. This narrative therefore contributes to the prevailing aversion towards intervention in the crisis.

The divergent approaches of media outlets such as the Trenton Evening Times and the Miami Herald reveal the narratives embedded in media reporting on the Bosnian Genocide: one emphasizes the geopolitical futility of intervening in the conflict, while the other highlights the appalling human suffering and emotional toll. However, both these portrayals of the genocide ultimately foster helplessness and apathy for intervention within the public conscience, diminishing governmental responses to the Bosnian Genocide. This lack of action is reflected in the U.S. government's spending in Yugoslavia during the 1990s—characterized by a modest increase in aid allocation to the region at approximately \$1.2 million.<sup>17</sup> Spending only spiked to \$2.5 billion in 1996, a full year after the genocide’s recognized end.

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<sup>17</sup> "Figure A-1. Department of Defense Funding for Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1992-2018 (\$ in Thousands)," chart, EveryCRSReport.com, April 15, 2019, accessed May 15, 2024, [https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R45691.html#\\_Toc6222650](https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R45691.html#_Toc6222650).

In the years leading up to Darfur Genocide, Sudan had experienced a twenty-years-long civil war between its northern and southern regions.<sup>18</sup> It was only after 2 million people had died and over 4 million people displaced that the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005, heavily influenced by international intervention, ended this civil war. While the peace agreement may have been able to put an end to the civil war, it was unable to quell the ethnic tensions that underpinned the violence in the first place.

In Darfur, a region in western Sudan, distrust between ethnic groups remained especially high. Shortly after the peace deal, Darfuri rebels raided a government supply depot. In an act of retaliation and paranoia, the Sudanese government declared the Darfuri people responsible for the attack and launched a campaign of brutal ethnic violence against them. The government armed Arab militia groups known as the “Janjaweed” to attack African communities. This led to a systematic campaign of violence, including aerial bombings, village burnings, well poisonings, mass killings, and widespread rape. Nearly 400,000 people were killed, and millions were displaced.

In response to the first genocide of the twenty-first century, U.S. media consistently downplayed the gravity of the Darfur Genocide, employing misleading and dismissive narratives to frame the conflict. Ultimately, this under-reporting of the genocide and marginalization of its victims may have led to public indifference regarding the crisis, diminishing pressure on Congress to take action in the region.

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<sup>18</sup> "Genocide in Darfur," Holocaust Museum Houston, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://hnh.org/library/research/genocide-in-darfur-guide/>.

Although the genocide began in February of 2003,<sup>19</sup> it received nearly no media coverage throughout the year. Notably, the New York Times, the third most popular newspaper in the country,<sup>20</sup> published just one article regarding the Darfur conflict in 2003.<sup>21</sup> Astonishingly, the entire story consisted of merely three sentences:

Forty-four people were killed and 22 wounded in tribal clashes in western Sudan before security forces managed to restore calm, the independent newspaper Al Rai al-Aam said. The fighting took place between Arab and Masalit African tribesmen in the state of Darfur near the border with Chad, the paper quoted a police spokesman as saying. Scarce water resources and grazing land has caused intense rivalry between cattle-raising Arab tribesmen and African farming communities.<sup>22</sup>

The New York Times' severely limited coverage of the Darfur Genocide is indicative not only of a substantial oversight in the volume of reporting but also in the content of the reporting. The Times dismissed the conflict as "tribal clash[es]" between "Arab tribesmen" and "African farming communities", neglecting to discuss the political and military nuances at play. This process of reducing a complex situation to a caricature of the conflict creates a narrative of "othering", marginalizing the gravity of the genocide. Therefore, this portrayal influences the

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<sup>19</sup> "Genocide in Darfur," Holocaust Museum Houston.

<sup>20</sup> "Newspaper Circulation for 6 Months Ending 3/31/03," AdAge, last modified May 12, 2003, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://adage.com/article/datacenter/newspaper-circulation-6-mos-ending-3-31-03/106762>.

<sup>21</sup> "World Briefing | Africa: Sudan: Tribal Violence," *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), April 25, 2003, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/25/world/world-briefing-africa-sudan-tribal-violence.html?searchResultPosition=2>.

<sup>22</sup> "World Briefing".

public consciousness by diminishing the significance of the ethnic cleansing to that of a scuffle in a distant land.

As a result of waning public interest in the genocide, newspapers would have lacked incentive to allocate significant portions of time and money towards truly understanding the Darfur Genocide—there would be no return on their investment. Consequently, despite the proliferation of media coverage on the conflict from 2004 onwards, the marginalization of the Darfuri people persisted. In their research titled “The Evolving Narrative of the Darfur Conflict as Represented in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, 2003-2009”, Joel Gruley and Chris Duvall compiled a database of terminology employed in 2003-2009 news coverage surrounding the genocide.<sup>23</sup> Their analysis revealed that demeaning language such as “tribe”, “rebels”, “farmers”, and “nomads”,<sup>24</sup> as well as stereotypical depictions of affected people and landscapes, maintained upwards of 50% frequency across all articles analyzed.

The framing of the Darfuri people as “rebels” and “nomads” suggests a primitive and antiquated social structure, reinforcing stereotypes of African societies as inherently chaotic and uncivilized. This narrative perpetuates the notion that African people are intrinsically prone to violence, thus downplaying the severity of this genocide. Moreover, this characterization serves to distance “civilized” Western audiences from the suffering of the “primitive” Darfuri people, facilitating a tendency to overlook or dismiss their plight.

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<sup>23</sup> Joel Gruley and Chris S. Duvall, "The Evolving Narrative of the Darfur Conflict as Represented in the New York Times and the Washington Post, 2003–2009," *GeoJournal* 77, no. 1 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-010-9384-4>.

<sup>24</sup> As well as other derivative terms.

Similarly, the labeling Sudanese government forces as “farmers” and “tribes” further distorts the reality of the conflict. By trivializing the brutality of their systematic violence as inconsequential scuffles or local disputes, the media not only cultivates a dismissive attitude towards the Darfuri people’s suffering but also exonerates government forces from accountability in perpetuating a crime as serious as genocide. In the United States, this misleading narrative also undermines efforts to raise awareness for the conflict by diminishing the urgency surrounding the issue. This consequently leads to the apathetic bystander effect, wherein the public remains indifferent to the escalating violence of in Darfur.

Furthermore, the pervasiveness of stereotypical descriptions of the Darfuri people and the surrounding landscape reinforces cultural and geographical differences between Western audiences and Sudan. By emphasizing the “coal-black” and “camel herder” Darfuris in addition to the “parched fields” and “scorching sun” of the Sudanese desert, the media underscores a major disconnect between American bystanders and Darfur Genocide victims. This portrayal emphasizes the physical distance between these groups, through which emotional barriers can arise: The predominantly White civilians residing in metropolitan cities struggle to empathize with African-Arab Darfuris inhabiting comparatively remote desert settlements. Consequently, the American public loses concern for the crisis, precipitating a sense of apathy towards intervention in the Darfur Genocide.

Even when the government finally intervened in the genocide and enacted an aid package for Darfur, the vast majority of delivered aid was not humanitarian aid, but military aid. There

are a few key differences between these two types of spending. Humanitarian aid is by definition independent of warring parties.<sup>25</sup> It is provided by organizations to those who are suffering in order to supply basic human needs such as food, water, and shelter. Conversely, military aid is used to assist other countries with defense of their territory or people. Instead of food and water, military aid primarily consists of weapons, personnel, and logistical assets.

Examining the comparative spending trends of USAID<sup>26</sup> vs U.S. Military aid spending provided by a National Priorities Project analysis spanning twenty-three years, a drastic difference can be observed between these organizations' spending levels.<sup>27</sup> USAID expenditures between 2000<sup>28</sup> and 2018<sup>29</sup> hovered around \$13 billion, marginally increasing to just under \$15 billion by 2018. However, in the same time frame, military aid increased from \$7 billion to a high of \$21 billion in 2011<sup>30</sup>, then decreasing to just above humanitarian aid spending in 2018. While these figures represent total spending for each organization, one can extrapolate that spending in the Darfur region roughly follows the same trends presented by this data.

The continual overshadowing of the humanitarian aid budget by the military aid budget underscores a prevailing government and public perception wherein the wellbeing of the Darfuri are secondary to strategic goals in the region. In a time of grave need for victims of genocide,

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<sup>25</sup> "Refugee and Humanitarian Assistance," U.S. Department of State, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/policy-issues/refugee-and-humanitarian-assistance/>.

<sup>26</sup> USAID is the U.S. government's organization for humanitarian aid.

<sup>27</sup> Housseem Chamam, "At a Time of a Global Crises, the United States Is Weaponizing Its Humanitarian Aid," National Priorities Project, last modified July 29, 2020, accessed May 14, 2024, <https://www.nationalpriorities.org/blog/2020/07/29/global-crises-united-states-weaponizing-humanitarian-aid/>.

<sup>28</sup> Before the Darfur Genocide officially began.

<sup>29</sup> The end of the data provided by the National Priorities Project. The Darfur Genocide's official end was in 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Most likely due to other conflicts in Ethiopia, Iraq, and other flash-point zones that began a few years prior.

USAID humanitarian aid remained practically constant. In fact, upon closer inspection, the data reveals a decrease in humanitarian spending from 2003 to 2006.<sup>31</sup> This disparity between military and humanitarian aid from the United States demonstrates that the media failed to precipitate substantial action from the government to alleviate the suffering of genocide victims.

Furthermore, one can infer that the apparent prioritization of broader strategic interests (as represented by the military aid) over the plight of genocide victims (represented by USAID spending) may have actually been perpetuated by the media. Their dismissive and demeaning narratives towards the genocide may have again contributed to a sense of apathy for the Darfuri people and therefore aversion to governmental intervention.

The Rohingya Genocide, a harrowing chapter in Myanmar's recent history, unfolded against the backdrop of political persecution and longstanding ethnic tensions. Beginning with the government's unilateral constitutional revision in 2008 and a questionable victory in the 2010 national elections, the military-backed political party of Myanmar entrenched themselves within the government apparatus.<sup>32</sup> Since 2012, they have used this political influence to target the Rohingya population in Rakhine State with violence and state-sponsored Buddhist extremism.

With the arrival of Facebook and its monopolization of the country in 2011, every phone suddenly turned into a means of spreading this anti-Rohingya propaganda. The Facebook algorithm, built to feed users engaging content, quickly discovered that one thing, above all, triggered the Buddhist majority—hate for the Rohingya. Within just a few years, the entire

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<sup>31</sup> Chamman, "At a Time," National Priorities Project.

<sup>32</sup> "Burma's Path to Genocide," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://exhibitions.ushmm.org/burmas-path-to-genocide/timeline>.

country was being fed extremist and radicalizing content, all in the name of engagement. Past cases of isolated ethnic violence exploded into a nation-wide ticking time bomb. And, on October 9, 2016, the clock struck zero.

Armed civilians and the Myanmar military itself marched from village to village, in a campaign of systematic extermination of Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State. Tens of thousands of Rohingya were massacred, hundreds of homes burned to the ground, and over a million refugees fled the country.

In contrast to the Bosnian and Darfur genocides, the portrayal of the Rohingya Genocide by the media represents a notable departure from the past: Improving both quantity and quality of reporting, resulting in profoundly broadened public empathy. This evolution in media performance underscores journalism's capacity to adapt and enhance societal awareness over time.

In his dissertation titled "Framing the Rohingya Crisis of 2017: A Comparative Content Analysis of Four Newspapers from the United States and Bangladesh", Mohammad Delwar Hosen tracked and analyzed U.S. media coverage of the Rohingya Genocide, delving into both narratives employed and number of articles published.<sup>33</sup> Notably, during the peak of the crisis in 2017, media outlets exhibited an unprecedented surge in the number of articles dedicated to the Rohingya Genocide. For instance, the New York Times allocated over 30% of its total reporting

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<sup>33</sup> Mohammad Delwar Hosen, "Framing the Rohingya Crisis of 2017: A Comparative Content Analysis of Four Newspapers from the United States and Bangladesh" (master's thesis, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2020), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses (27995380).

to the conflict, while NewsNation surpassed this with nearly 50% of its total stories. This remarkable increase in media attention starkly contrasts with historical patterns observed in prior genocides, such as the Darfur Genocide, where media coverage remained notably deficient in comparison. Compared to the singular New York Times article dedicated to the Darfur conflict in 2003, this reporting rate on the 2017 Rohingya Genocide represents an order of magnitude more people made aware of the atrocities unfolding in Myanmar. The sheer volume of public awareness constitutes a pivotal step towards influencing public perceptions of genocide in a beneficial manner. Moreover, this progress also lays the groundwork for future activism aimed at inciting governmental action.

Aside from tracking the quantity of reporting, Hosen's analysis also characterized the tone of each article, ranging from negative to positive portrayals of Rohingya refugees. His investigation revealed that U.S. media outlets characterized the Rohingya overwhelmingly positively, primarily through the utilization of a human-interest narrative. This narrative strategy, as defined by Hosen, presents an individual's experiences in a manner that encourages interest and sympathy from the reader. By personalizing the stories of the Rohingya refugees, this media framework allows the public to better empathize with the plight of the Rohingya, fostering an organic sense of urgency and desire to intervene in this humanitarian crisis.

While there has been a noticeable improvement in both the quantity and quality of media coverage surrounding the Rohingya Genocide, it's essential to address two key limitations with the success of these efforts. One of the most glaring shortcomings is the absence of coverage on

television news networks. Despite the surge in print and online articles dedicated to the Rohingya crisis, television news largely overlooked the genocide. According to the Tyndall Report, an archive of weekday nightly newscasts from the three largest American broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC), no coverage whatsoever regarding the Rohingya crisis surfaced among the top twenty stories for any given year.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, comparatively mundane topics such as winter weather and tornado season accumulated over 100 minutes of coverage in 2017, suggesting that the Rohingya Genocide received less than one and a half hours of coverage 365 days since its start in 2016.

This omission is particularly concerning given the vast audience that relies on television networks for their primary news source. While online and print media captured roughly 60% of the American public,<sup>35</sup> nearly one in every three people in 2019 still said their primary news source was TV.<sup>36</sup> Extrapolating this statistic to the entire U.S. population in 2019 (approximately 328 million), roughly 190 million viewers did not benefit from the improved quality and quantity of reporting. Consequently, the absence of the genocide's coverage on TV presents a significant barrier to fully leveraging modern media's capacity to enhance societal awareness and rally support for genocide victims.

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<sup>34</sup> "Tyndall Year in Review 2016," Tyndall Report, accessed May 15, 2024, <http://tyndallreport.com/yearinreview2016/>.

<sup>35</sup> "News Platform Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center, last modified November 15, 2023, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-platform-fact-sheet/?tabItem=4ef8dece-845a-4b25-8637-ceb3114503c5>.

<sup>36</sup> "The US Media Morph: 2024 Trend Report," YouGov, last modified January 25, 2024, accessed May 15, 2024, [https://business.yougov.com/content/48440-us-media-trends-report-2024?utm\\_medium=advertising&utm\\_source=Industry-Dive&utm\\_campaign=ADV-2024-01-US-Media-Trend-Report-Industry-Dive](https://business.yougov.com/content/48440-us-media-trends-report-2024?utm_medium=advertising&utm_source=Industry-Dive&utm_campaign=ADV-2024-01-US-Media-Trend-Report-Industry-Dive).

In addition to the absence of television coverage, one must also consider the effectiveness of heightened media attention in actually creating tangible interventions for the Rohingya people. After all, heightened attention without corresponding action is merely meaningless banter. While public awareness has undoubtedly been raised through increased reporting, the correlation between media coverage and meaningful intervention remains questionable for the Rohingya Genocide.

In Michelle J. Lee's study on the media's influence on humanitarian interventions in the Rohingya Genocide, she analyzed the frequency of news articles mentioning the Rohingya people and compared it to the yearly number of refugees from Rakhine.<sup>37</sup> Her research revealed that as media reporting (and consequently public awareness) increased, so did the number of refugees. The stark rise in refugee rates demonstrates a failure of the United States government to effectively curtail the ongoing genocide. Therefore, the abundance of media attention during this period of governmental inaction underscores the media's inability to precipitate governmental responses to genocide.

Overall, the genocide in Myanmar has revealed a notable evolution in U.S. media coverage since the mid-1990s and the early 2000s—both for the better and worse. Recent years have witnessed an enhancement in the quantity and quality of media reporting, characterized by a significant volume of articles exhibiting sympathetic rhetoric towards the victims of the genocide. This improved standard of media coverage holds the potential to cultivate greater

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<sup>37</sup> Michelle J. Lee, "Media Influence on Humanitarian Interventions: Analysis of the Rohingya Refugee Crisis and International Media Coverage," *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 6, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-021-00108-5>.

public empathy and understanding of the conflict, thereby possibly generating actionable awareness.

Nevertheless, a critical issue with prior reporting persists: Translating this heightened public awareness into tangible governmental action. The surge in Rohingya refugee rates in 2017, correlating with a major escalation in mainstream media coverage, illustrates this dilemma. The direct correlation between media attention and refugee influx indicates a failure of media influence to pressure the United States government into intervening in the Rohingya Genocide, thereby alleviating refugee numbers. While this dichotomy marks a significant evolution in public-facing media narratives, the transition from individual awareness to national action, arguably the most important step in genocide prevention, continues to pose a formidable obstacle.

Since the dissolution of the USSR, the post-Cold War era has transitioned the global consciousness away from threats of nuclear annihilation to the specter of ethnic eradication through genocide. Within the United States, despite heightened awareness of international affairs in the age of media coverage, public awareness of genocide has not consistently translated to governmental intervention in these atrocities.

In the 1990s, during the Bosnian Genocide, media narratives often fostered a sense of hopelessness and futility, discouraging public advocacy and government action. Outlets both national and local emphasized the perceived inevitability of the conflict, leading to reader apathy. In the 2000s, Darfur experienced the opposite narrative in media reporting but with the same

effect. Dismissive framing of the conflict as “tribal” clashes reinforced stereotypes and distanced the American public from Darfuri victims. This under-reporting contributed to the marginalization of the crisis, eroding the public’s and government’s urgency to take meaningful action.

The Rohingya Genocide of the late 2010s demonstrated an evolution of these media impacts, with considerable influence on public empathy and awareness in spite of a lack luster impact on effective governmental action. News outlets dedicated unprecedented coverage to the crisis, overwhelmingly employing a human-interest narrative that fostered empathy and awareness. Yet, the lack of television news coverage as well as the questionable impacts on genocide severity markers contributed to a failing in a crucial aspect of genocide prevention—government action.

While recent media reporting represents progress towards responsible and productive coverage of genocides, the responsibility for intervention does not solely lie with the media. As responsible citizens of the lone global superpower and so-called international “police force”, we must not wait for media coverage to advocate for the basic human rights of the oppressed. Whether it be sending letters to local congress members or actively protesting government inaction, the collective voices of the people are louder than a handful of editor’s opinions. Let us not abandon this responsibility to the press: You can transform awareness into action.

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