Public scholarship amidst tragedy:
Lessons from the Rwandan genocide
by Adrienne Massanari

Introduction

In the United States, there are approximately 1,000,000 scholars working at institutions of higher education.¹ Imagine for a moment that the government decided to issue each one of these individuals an identity card with his/her picture and the word “Academic” on it. Now, imagine that an extremist group takes control of the government and decides that these academics are a threat to their existence. They start a campaign to make sure that everyone who is not an academic believes that these academics are a threat to their existence. The extremists in power start broadcasting hate speech and propaganda over the radio telling non-academics that these scholars are the root cause of their problems and that “regular people” should take up arms and eliminate them. Now, imagine if all of the non-academics took up machetes and started killing all of the academics, even though these academics are their brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, wives, and husbands. These mass murders take place over the course of 90 days, in which almost all of the academics in the United States die.

In terms of scale, this is what happened in Rwanda in 1994. Unlike the scene I described above, the targets of the Rwandan killings were Tutsis, decimated at the hands of their extremist Hutu neighbors. In a mere 90 days, more than 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus died. Friends killed friends, husbands and wives killed their partners, sons and daughters killed their parents, and parents killed their children. It was one of the grisliest massacres in the 20th century, and it happened extremely quickly. Although aware

¹ There were 1,027,830 faculty members in postsecondary institutions during 2000-2001, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. NCES. Historical Summary of Faculty, Students, Degrees, and Finances in Degree-Granting Institutions: 1869-70 to 2000-01, 2002 [cited June 5 2004]. Available from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d02/tables/dt171.asp.
of the killings, the United Nations and the United States did little to prevent them. At no point was the word “genocide” uttered by officials, despite clear indications that the mass murders constituted nothing less than an attempt to eradicate the Tutsi population.\(^2\)

Moreover, while there were academics trying their best to get United Nations (UN) and United States (US) officials to take this threat seriously, few policymakers listened.

The Rwandan genocide is a striking example of the high price we all pay when political officials, the press, the public, and the academy do not work together to solve social problems. Despite the relatively small effort it would have taken to prevent a majority of the killings, policymakers were reluctant to intervene.\(^3\) In this short paper, I attempt to understand some of the lessons for public scholarship that we can glean from the Rwandan genocide. Do academics have a responsibility to speak out against this type of brutality? If so, how should scholars engage the public and policymakers? What role can academics play in understanding why the genocide occurred, and how can their work help prevent these types of massacres in the future?

**Scholars and the larger community**

Academics have a responsibility to work with the public on issues like the Rwandan genocide. From a purely ethical standpoint, it seems contrary to the academy’s educational mission if scholars do not make their unique perspective about global events available to the public. Michele Wagner, an assistant professor at history at the University of Minnesota, who worked as a human rights investigator in Rwanda, believes that academics have a responsibility to repay society for the numerous resources that went into educating them. She notes, “...I feel a very great responsibility to reciprocate on that investment, even if (or

\(^2\) For a discussion of the different stages of genocide, see (http://genocidewatch.org/HOWWECANPREVENTGENOCIDE.htm).

\(^3\) See Frontline’s excellent documentary *Ghosts of Rwanda* for a more in-depth discussion of the UN and US’s stance on Rwanda. (Available online at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ghosts/video/).
maybe particularly if) what I have to say is not what the political interests at hand want to hear. Why invest in educating citizens if citizens are simply there to be manipulated by political interests?" For Dr. Wagner, and many other academics, teaching can be a very powerful way to connect to a larger public outside the university. She believes that her educational responsibilities and activism interconnect, because teaching allows her to have a dialogue with and connect with a larger public.

However, some scholars might argue that their role within the academy is more about the acquisition of knowledge and less about the dissemination of knowledge to individuals outside of their specialization. When met with protest, these scholars might say that creating a dialogue with the public requires a significant amount of the limited time that their department expects them to spend researching, teaching, and engaging in service to their university. For these individuals, the benefits of creating a dialogue with the public—beyond regular teaching responsibilities—are insufficient to warrant the amount of time and energy it costs. Additionally, they may view their work as being uninteresting to laypeople. In my view, these objections suggest that the relationship between the public and the academy needs to change so that scholars feel as though their work is valuable to a larger community.

How scholars can share their expertise with the public

The work of academics can assist the public in understanding issues of global importance. They can speak to journalists and the public, offering them a better sense of the historical and political context in which tragedies like Rwanda occur. They can advise international policymakers and US officials directly or work for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) monitoring ongoing conflict in global hotspots. Academics can also

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4 Michele D. Wagner, e-mail interview by author, 1 June 2004.

5 Ibid.
engage in activism, working as human rights investigators in the regions affected by genocide. Additionally, they can collaborate with other scholars (especially those from the affected regions) to prevent such tragedies from occurring in the first place. As Dr. Stanton, president of Genocide Watch, states, “In order to prevent genocide, we must first understand it. We must study and compare genocides and develop a working theory about the genocidal process.”

This area is one where academics can contribute the most by researching and publicizing the political, social, and cultural factors that create an environment ripe for genocide. A number of research centers across the world focus on genocidal research, but Stanton argues that academics should also be involved in the creation of institutions that have the will and power to prevent genocide from occurring in the first place. Humanitarianism will not be enough to prevent genocide; early warning systems are necessary if we want to avoid such tragedies in the future.

In addition to their work with policymakers, academics can provide valuable information to the public about the root causes of genocide and other forms of social injustice. Scholars are usually in a position to see a “bigger picture” when it comes to these sorts of conflicts. For example, scholars are now suggesting that the violence in Rwanda was partially a product of racist colonial attitudes towards Rwandans that cast Hutus and Tutsis as being entirely different ethnic groups.

It is precisely because of academics’ ability to “broaden [their] analytical framework both temporarily and spatially [that allows them

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to...avoid falling into the ‘either-or’ ruts that political discourse...tends to promote.” This makes them incredibly valuable in helping the public understand what is behind these sorts of tragedies.\textsuperscript{10} Additionally, scholars can offer their expertise to journalists and provide greater context for the media’s coverage of these events. This, in turn, helps the public understand the root causes of tragedies like Rwanda.

**Obstacles to public scholarship**

Though scholars can offer the public valuable information that helps place genocide in a larger historical global and political context, there are a number of obstacles facing their work. First, there is the possibility that working on these sorts of large social issues will brand the scholar as an “activist.” Whereas some academics may see social activism as intertwined with their work inside the university, others might view this sort of work as a hindrance to their ability to be objective in their research. Still others, like Dr. Wagner, might see their work as incredibly important to the larger community but may face resistance from colleagues within their own field.\textsuperscript{11}

Scholars may also have difficulty reaching out to the organizations that they try to advise or otherwise influence. Michael Barnett, a professor of political science at University of Wisconsin, was intimately involved in the UN’s response to Rwanda as a political officer who worked on the UN’s operations in Somalia and Rwanda during 1993 and 1994. In his book, *Eyewitness to a Genocide*, he suggests a number of reasons why UN officials were unprepared to deal with the impending crisis. He notes,

> First, policymakers can and should be forgiven if they did not possess an anthropologist’s understanding of the culture or a historian’s knowledge of the crooked path that made Rwanda what it was. They were not anthropologists or historians. In most cases, they did not even possess firsthand experience of Rwanda.... Second, the constant juggling of operations meant that there was little time to master Rwandan history or synthesize the discrete pieces of information that

\textsuperscript{10} Wagner, interview, 1 June 2004.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
were consumed sporadically over time. Few had the luxury to obtain a detailed understanding of a conflict that was of marginal importance, and most had to satisfy themselves with an undergraduate lecture’s worth of knowledge. Third, the scarcity of time produced a highly instrumental approach to information. It means, in short, putting aside the very complexity that historians and anthropologists have reproduced dutifully in their postgenocidal studies.12

Barnett’s comments point out a number of important issues for academics. He suggests that the policymakers in these crises often have little time or inclination to listen to scholars. This may also have something to do with the tone that scholars adopt when talking about their research. Policymakers who must make decisions under extreme amounts of pressure and face severe consequences if their actions do not solve the conflict quickly, may want quick synopses of the major issues, rather than long reports filled with complex details and extensive background information. This sets up a paradox – university departments and disciplines train scholars to be methodical and meticulous in their research, but to reach the public and policymakers, academics must be succinct and write for an audience that wants “just the facts.”

In the case of Rwanda, a number of individuals tried to influence UN officials and the US government but had a hard time getting officials to listen. Dr. Wagner suggests that this points to a fundamental flaw in the relationship between the academy and policymakers. Wagner notes that politicians “are driven by ‘national interest’...and do not particularly care what scholars (or even CIA analysts, who had predicted catastrophic large-scale violence) have to say....” However, the blame does not only rest with these organizations; Wagner suggests that scholars have incredible difficulty influencing the larger public’s perception of global events.13 Because the public often elects policymakers, it might be difficult for officials to take the work of academics seriously if their constituents do not pressure them directly.


13 Wagner, interview, 1 June 2004.
Academics often reach the public through the media, which may play a significant role in promoting or preventing a larger dialogue about social issues. However, journalists and scholars often speak two different languages. Like policymakers, journalists often want definitive recommendations as to how the public and policymakers should think about global issues. Academics, however, may not want to speculate on complex problems that rarely have easy solutions. The media also faces external pressure from the public, who often look to the media for brief synopses about world events. Dr. Wagner comments that scholars have a tendency to talk to more “intellectual” media outlets – those like NPR and the New York Times that tend to attract more homogenous, better educated audiences than publications like USA Today, for example. She also suggests that the difficulties between the academy and the media may be rooted in the “culture wars.” As she notes,

...scholars and their discourse have been depicted as antithetical to the public and the larger public conversation.... Mainstream American society, while being highly ‘technophile’, is profoundly anti-intellectual – a trend fostered by the political system that conflates ‘democracy’ and ‘dumb’ and celebrates ‘simple common sense’ rather than critical thought.14

Changing the public’s perception that intellectuals live in ivory towers, and come down only to pass judgment on a world in which they seem to know little about, requires a fundamental shift in the media and academy’s relationship. Both sides need to establish a greater respect for the other and collaborate in an effort to understand and solve significant social problems.

Scholars may also choose other ways besides using the media to have their voices heard about human rights abuses. One way might be by taking direct action by working with NGOs monitoring conflict or otherwise participating in humanitarian efforts in remote areas of the world. However, scholars doing work like this may face hostilities from the individuals and communities they are trying to help. As Dr. Wagner writes in an article about her work with Human Rights Watch after the Rwandan genocide,

14 Ibid.
In 1994-1995, génocidaires ['the enemy'] were identified in every quarter. The United Nations itself – its UN Assistance Mission to Rwanda (UNAMIR) forces having failed to respond to the April 1994 killing – was labeled a génocidaire. I, as a member of ‘the international community’ whose predecessors had simply evacuated and left Rwandans behind to die, was a génocidaire as well. Particularly as a human rights worker, I was critical of abuses against all persons (including those being committed by the current government whose takeover of Rwanda in July had halted the genocide). Having done nothing when the genocide had taken place and now criticizing RPF retaliation killings, I was at least a ‘genocide accomplice.’

Reactions like this create an ethical dilemma for academics, many of whom might find it difficult to work in a situation where the people that they are trying to help actually view them as somehow complicit or otherwise responsible for the violence others have caused. Indeed, it is often because of the official support of government agencies and organizations that might make scholars’ attempts to offer their expertise to communities, derided, viewed with suspicion, or even outright unwelcome.

Conclusion

What can we learn about the importance of public scholarship in the face of tragic events like the Rwandan genocide? Scholars clearly have important things to contribute to the discussion and prevention of these types of tragedies. They can do this in a number of ways: working with politicians and governmental organizations to inform policy decisions; monitoring ongoing conflict in the world’s regions or working as human rights observers; and consulting with journalists so that the public has a greater understanding of how to make sense of such senseless violence. Academics can also work with their students to assist them in becoming critical thinkers and educating them on social problems from a global perspective. Tying practical, real-world experience to the things taught in our classrooms might be one way of achieving this goal.

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16 Wagner, interview, 1 June 2004. Dr. Wagner also suggested adjusting the education that graduate students receive from the university. She notes, "...much of the training teaches students to engage in ‘scholarly discourse’, which is fine, but students need training that re-connects them back to society"
As I have discussed, scholars have an important role to play in connecting their work to publics outside the academy. There is no guarantee that the public will listen to their words, but it is imperative that scholars not hide in the shadows of academic and bureaucratic organizations. As Human Rights Watch’s official report on the Rwandan genocide notes,

...this genocide was not an uncontrollable outburst of rage by a people consumed by ‘ancient tribal hatreds.’ Nor was it the preordained result of the impersonal forces of poverty and over-population. This genocide resulted from the deliberate choice of a modern elite to foster hatred and fear to keep itself in power.\footnote{17}

Rwanda was a preventable tragedy, and we would be remiss if we did not learn everything we could about the causes of this genocide. We must find new and creative ways for scholars to interact with the public, the media, and policymakers. Finally, we need to create a new generation of academics who view public scholarship as an integral part of their apprenticeship into the academy.

\footnote{17} Alison Des Forges, "Leave None to Tell the Story": \textit{Genocide in Rwanda} (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999): 1.
Further Reading
Yale University’s Genocide Studies program has information about a number of modern genocides (Cambodia, Rwanda, and East Timor) as well as the Holocaust. ([http://www.yale.edu/gsp/index.html](http://www.yale.edu/gsp/index.html))

Prevent Genocide International provides extensive links to documentation about many different genocides and mass killings. ([http://www.preventgenocide.org/](http://www.preventgenocide.org/))

International Crisis Group (ICG) monitors conflict throughout the world and provides regular briefings on potential ethnic cleansing and other abuses. ([http://crisisweb.org/home/index.cfm](http://crisisweb.org/home/index.cfm))

Samantha Power’s excellent article explains the Clinton Administration’s refusal to get involved in the Rwandan genocide and provides a sobering account of what went on behind-the-scenes in the White House and the disastrous consequences that resulted. ([http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2001/09/power.htm](http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2001/09/power.htm))

PBS’s documentary series *Frontline* has profiled the Rwandan genocide several times, but *Ghosts of Rwanda*, which commemorates the 10th anniversary of this tragedy, has exclusive interviews with a number of the leading UN and US officials. ([http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ghosts/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ghosts/))

The UN’s Web site contains a special section about the Rwandan genocide that provides background information about the genocide as well information about the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda that is prosecuting the perpetrators. ([http://www.un.org/events/rwanda/](http://www.un.org/events/rwanda/))

Human Rights Watch’s Web site contains excellent information about human rights abuses around the world, but their section about the Rwandan genocide is particularly excellent. They also provide the complete text of Alison Des Forges’ report, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* online. ([http://www.hrw.org/doc?t=africa&c=rwanda](http://www.hrw.org/doc?t=africa&c=rwanda))