Feature Article

Reporting Atrocity
War, Neutrality, and the Danger of Taking Sides

Samantha Power

This article is an edited version of a Shorenstein Center presentation by Samantha Power on February 17, 2004.

Alex Jones: Samantha Power has made an enormous contribution to the public understanding and the public awareness of something that has been remarkably under understood. Her wonderful book, that won a Pulitzer Prize, *"A Problem from Hell": America in the Age of Genocide*, is a book, I suspect, that many of you have read. It's an important book and has been recognized as such. Today, her topic is "Reporting Atrocity: War, Neutrality, and the Danger of Taking Sides." Welcome, Samantha.

Samantha Power: Thank you, it's great to be here, great to see all of you. Two years ago this month, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Danny Pearl was kidnapped and murdered in Karachi, Pakistan. This talk is part of a series that is being held in his honor at journalism schools and other universities throughout this country and in Europe. The series is called "The Press under Fire" and in it we come together to talk about how the media reports conflict, the protection of reporters in dangerous situations, press freedoms, the perception of Western media abroad, and foreign coverage at home.

The idea is to reflect on the values that Danny represented and advanced in his work. For those of you who are interested in this more generally, you should visit the Daniel Pearl Foundation Web site, <www.danielpearl.org>, where you'll see much more on this topic, and much more about Danny himself.

I'm not going to speak about genocide or atrocity or human rights, as such, because I thought that in coming back to the Shorenstein Center today, I would talk about the process of reporting on human rights, humanitarian issues, and genocide.

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First, I will talk about the challenges of securing space and attention for material that is often off journalism's beaten path, material that is "nearly humanitarian," and that doesn't necessarily "map" with strategic interests. Second, I will speak to the challenges reporters face once permission and the resources to report have been secured.

Thirdly, I will discuss the issue of taking sides. And, finally, I will conclude by talking about the kind of advocacy journalism that I do. I still consider myself a human rights advocate, but as a journalist, I use reporting to advance my ends.

I now have the luxury of doing magazine journalism and do not have to report to an editor day to day. I want to make clear that there are different media and what I do is different from what most journalists have to do and even want to do. Thus, some of the challenges that one might face as a reporter would, in a sense, be far greater than those which I face because I can now be quite explicit in what I'm going after. Partly, this is because I teach at the Kennedy School and have a day job; without this support it would be very challenging.

First, the challenge of getting coverage for humanitarian issues. The good news is that in the wake of 9/11, many of the news bureaus that were closed down in the 1990s have reopened. A number of studies were commissioned by the Shorenstein Center to analyze the average time and space devoted to foreign news coverage which they found had plummeted, in line with the general American foreign policy retreat after the cold war.

Now there is an increase in coverage and in money spent on foreign news. The question that burns in every American's mind is, "Why do they hate us?" There is a newfound awareness and outward orientation that has come in the wake of the challenge of terrorism.

You see this not only in the mainstream press that we might read, but even out in the "red states" in middle America, you find a greater predisposition for local papers to pick up foreign news wire stories. You didn't see much of that in the 1990s.

As someone who is in the position of pitching stories to editors, it is clear that if you can now make a link between what you're pitching and the war on terrorism there's a real receptivity. This is true even if the story is soft and fluffy and humanitarian and simply about large loss of life or casualties. And though this is diminishing somewhat, there remains an appetite for foreign news that can be linked even indirectly to the priorities that have been set in Washington.

So the good news is that there is a greater orientation toward the outside world among domestic news outlets. The bad news, predictably, is that when it comes to places that don't map directly or persuasively to the war on terrorism, the old Fleet Street saying, "When it bleeds, it leads," is the rule and not the exception.

Unless you have a situation that has come to carnage point it is difficult to obtain coverage; and carnage is very tricky because it can't be so systemic and

regular that it ceases to be newsworthy. And yet, when it becomes newsworthy, it tends to happen so quickly that you have difficulty moving the machine and getting there in time to cover the killing.

For instance, killing has been an element of daily life in Sudan for the better part of the last twenty years. Fortunately, a peace deal is in the process of being constructed. But it was very, very difficult to get magazine editors, and even newspaper editors interested in the chronic killing campaign that may well have left over 2 million people dead.

Just two or three weeks ago, we began to see a new round of killing in Sudan with a different configuration of groups. It is no longer violence directed at Christians and animists in the south, but rather racially motivated violence on Sudan's border with Chad. Suddenly, newspapers don't even know what to do. You have the chronic killing and now you have the spike of new killing. It's still Sudan so people are under the impression that Sudan is always at war. Does the new killing count as news? You see people groping to orient themselves around that killing.

In Rwanda and even Bosnia, it was very, very difficult to secure an appetite for "preventive journalism," or journalism where you are describing bad business as usual. In Sudan things are getting worse and worse, but it hasn't yet culminated in bodies floating down the river, as became the case in Rwanda, or men in concentration camps, as one saw in Bosnia.

The problem with journalists not getting to a place before it gets really messy in countries off the national interest radar screen is first that readers aren't alerted to places ahead of time and that correspondingly policy makers don't see readers' interest at stake. But second, if journalists wait until the killing starts, their learning curve has to be extremely steep in very difficult circumstances.

Without having built a network of contacts, the reporter parachutes in and is at the mercy of fixers or minders. And usually, sadly, we see this reflected in the nature of the coverage in the early weeks and months of campaigns of killing. Early coverage tends to be very deferential to official sources because upon arrival, the first thing a reporter does is to go to the official places—which are up and running even in wartime—to get a press pass.

There are very few instances of editors or journalists taking the initiative and deciding that, on simple humanitarian grounds, something matters enough to deploy the resources. But let me give you a couple of examples where that has happened.

Just before 9/11, Ted Koppel decided that, with the International Rescue Committee estimating 3 million dead in the Democratic Republic of Congo from a combination of disease, HIV, famine, cholera, and ethnically motivated massacres, it was time for *Nightline* to spend its resources capturing what was happening on the ground there. People were haunted by Rwanda and the perceptions of failure not only on the policy side but also on the media side.

The *Nightline* crew traveled to the Eastern Congo in July 2001. They created five half-hour-long segments to be aired over five nights in September 2001. Koppel and *Nightline* producer Tom Bettag decided to announce to the United States that the Congo mattered even though it wasn't featured in the daily press and even though no Western country was close to getting involved.

Sadly, on Friday, September 7, 2001, Ted Koppel opened up this series by saying something along the lines of, "We're about to give you a show that we know you don't want to watch. You haven't been asking for it, but we're here to tell you it matters. It matters simply because of the human stakes involved. Please let us show you why we need to take the lead on this, and you need to come with us. Don't go away." It was a human plea, appealing to what he and all the executives know to be the instincts of the audience, namely to turn the channel to watch "David Letterman." He was trying to disarm by simply saying, "We don't do this often, we're not crying 'Wolf!' This is really, really bad."

The second segment was to have aired Tuesday, September 11, but, of course, with what happened that day, the broadcast was delayed until January 2002. All of the momentum and press coverage that *Nightline* generated dissipated after 9/11.

My second example is closer to home. Two or three years ago I began noticing John Donnelly's byline in the *Boston Globe*. Science and Technology isn't normally my thing, but I had noticed that the *Boston Globe* was far superior to the *New York Times* in coverage of AIDS—not just on the issue of HIV in Africa specifically, but HIV on the science side and on the prevention, treatment and care side.

It was the regularity of the *Globe* coverage that was striking. It got to the point where you could count on reading a homespun article on HIV, on the science side or on the political side, two or three times a week. I said, "What's going on here?" So I began to look and it John Donnelly. As it turns out, Donnelly had been given the Science and Technology beat, and had decided that there was no issue on the Earth more pressing than the disappearance of a continent.

He managed to create—and I'm amazed that he was able to get away with it—completely artificial news pegs. If there was a South African trade delegation coming to Washington and he was based in Washington, he would turn what would likely otherwise have been a story about trade which another part of the bureau would have covered, into an issue related to patents, HIV, and antiretrovirals. If the president of Uganda came to talk about trade or farm subsidies, Donnelly would turn it into a story about Uganda's AIDS program.

John Donnelly had decided that AIDS was "it" and that he would find his own Trojan horses wherever they arose. Editors occasionally give reporters like Donnelly license to get out in front of reader demand and U.S. government priorities to bring an issue to the public.

However, one thing deserves to be said. If you're not taking the John Donnelly approach—if instead you're doing something like Ted Koppel and *Nightline*

did—it's very expensive to go to these failed or brutal states. Because per capita income in the developing world is so small, one might expect that one can just slip in and operate in the local currency and be able to achieve a lot for very little money, relative to someone, let's say, in the Paris bureau. However, it turns out that the cost of living in most of these societies will be three times that in Paris because of the added costs of hiring translators and fixers, renting the armored car and dealing on the black market for fuel and other commodities.

Editors are making decisions not simply on the basis of audience appetite, but also after a cost-benefit analysis that weighs these expenses.

A second point in the "bad news" section of reporting humanitarian issues is the derivative quality of American reporting, whether in newspapers or magazines. In the nineties, both the Clinton administration and the Bush administration before it believed that we could come home after the cold war and focus on the economy. There was a retreat in terms of international engagement. The press coverage of the decade mirrored that government's priorities.

Reporting on the war on terrorism shares the derivative quality of earlier American reporting. The war on terrorism matters to Americans and news priorities are set by national priorities in Washington. When Americans are involved, the cameras follow. Take Liberia when it looked as if the United States was on the brink of an intervention.

When U.S. ships were floating offshore and the Bush administration was attempting to spearhead a multilateral operation, you had almost daily coverage in the *New York Times* of the situation in Liberia. Now that America's nonrole has been established, now that the ships have retreated, and the job has been handed over to the Nigerians and others, the press has long since left.

There are ways in which that pattern can be overcome. American delegations, for instance, create their own sense of newsworthiness. President Bush's trip to Africa generated more Africa coverage in most papers than one had seen in the entire year before. As well, Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill's trip throughout Africa with Bono generated a remarkable amount of coverage.

Field-based journalists who are either stringers or assigned to bureaus are looking to come up with a news peg and a link to America that will persuade editors and, hopefully, even readers, that their coverage is important. American delegations can accomplish this.

One of the shames of the last two years was when the *New York Times* disbanded a very small section of the paper which had been introduced during the war in Iraq. It was just as short as the war was short—the traditional combat portion of the war that is. The *Times* created a section on the back page comprised of short summaries—mainly editorials—translated from major papers around the world. One from a paper in Jakarta, *Aljazeera*, *Ha'aretz*, or *Le Monde*. I can't imagine it was a terribly costly section to add to the paper. The section took advantage of the fact that readers were then curious about what other people think of

America. But the minute the war ended, or seemed to end, that section was disbanded. The *International Herald Tribune* has since reintroduced a shorter version of it, but not many Americans read the *Trib*.

Let me now speak briefly about the issue of neutrality and taking sides. It is very difficult to report atrocity from a place of conflict. As journalists, we bring the expectation that we should multisource and that we should not use unnamed sources. We also bring the expectation of neutrality. However, as we learned in Bosnia, there is a difference between neutrality and objectivity. Initially, when people who had been working beats elsewhere went into Bosnia, there was a tendency to try to maintain the appearance of evenhandedness, despite the fact that one side was committing the bulk of the atrocities. Reporters would say, "Okay, if I cover a Serb massacre of Muslims one day, then the next day I should go and find a Muslim massacre of Serbs."

You also saw this desire to maintain the appearance of evenhandedness in the early weeks of coverage of the Rwandan genocide. But the reporter's job is to convey the truth of the proportions. This doesn't mean not reporting a Muslim massacre of Serbs, but neither does it mean devoting your day to going out to find something that may or may not be there so as to offset or equalize something you reported yesterday.

We're lucky enough to live in a place where we haven't experienced genocide and therefore feel the pressure of what I call a "just world" theory—the idea that if something happens to you, if you're being killed on ethnic grounds, you must have done something to deserve that killing. It is a bias that I initially brought into these situations, situations which engender the " 'Nah' effect." You just cannot bring yourself to believe that human beings are gratuitously murdering men, women, and children simply on the grounds of ethnicity or religion or nationality. You think there has to be something else going on. But you learn quickly that sometimes it is that simple or that if there is something going on, it isn't at all commensurate to the response.

Ignorance is a huge liability. Much of the early coverage of atrocities carried out against civilians is framed in terms of civil war and ancient ethnic hatreds. Most of these atrocities occur in places where reporters don't have the language skills they need to operate on their own or to acquire any kind of "coffee shop" or "man on the street" understanding.

We are left very dependent on our translators and, in some cases, our minders. In many instances, in order to get permission to get into a territory to report, you are accompanied everywhere you go. This, of course, makes it difficult for people to speak freely. But these are often the terms of deployment.

One of the challenges in the actual reporting of these atrocities is terminology. Newspapers will not take it upon themselves to anoint carnage as "genocide." A delegation of genocide scholars will meet with *Times* Executive Editor Bill Keller in March to discuss the *New York Times*'s refusal even to acknowledge

that what was done in 1915 to the Armenians was genocide. So eighty-nine years later we are still trying to get the *New York Times* to call that genocide. They will refer to the Holocaust and to Rwanda as "genocide" but not Armenia in 1915.

At the time that atrocities are being perpetrated, journalists are sometimes right to steer clear of the controversy. Genocide is a legal and political determination. But it becomes absurd when journalists wait around as they did in Rwanda for a political official to define the killing as genocide in order to use the term. It looked like genocide to them, it looked like an intent to exterminate, in the case of Rwanda, every last Tutsi. But journalists refrain from starting what they know to be true. And it matters: a story on massacres will be placed in the *New York Times* on page A-17, whereas a story on a genocide under way is far more likely to earn an A-1 cover page.

The flip side to the danger of neutrality is the danger of taking sides. By "taking sides," I don't mean rooting for the Tutsis in Rwanda or rooting against Charles Taylor in Liberia. I mean not acting merely as a stenographer in the face of these injustices, but instead thinking prescriptively, framing coverage around what one would want the desired outcome to be: what one would want one's readers to do, what one would want one's readers to influence their governments to do, how one would want people to think about the crisis and the steps needed to improve conditions.

Here, taking sides carries perils. The hubris of even thinking in terms of "What should be done?" is colossal. We can get it badly wrong. We can get it wrong because of language barriers and local ignorance; we can get the facts wrong; we can get the interpretation of the facts wrong; and we can get the implication of the facts wrong. There is so much to get wrong in societies that are not your own. There is so much to get wrong even in those societies that are your own.

In Bosnia, once people overcame their predisposition to be evenhanded and to go out of their way to describe atrocities on "all sides" in the Balkans, they sometimes went too far in the other direction. When the Bosnian Muslims began to arm and carry out atrocities, there was a blindness to the reporting, a desire to keep the story as simple as possible.

A second challenge to reporting is aesthetic. How does one write with moral urgency without being moralistic? Ultimately, I rely on the mantra of "show and don't tell" whenever I'm writing. No matter what you think should be done, no matter what you think is going on, ultimately your job as the reporter is to get out of the way and to let the characters that you've encountered take over.

A final challenge is to allow the ambiguity of these situations to reveal itself without leaving the reader powerless. The answer to atrocity is not black-and-white media portrayals that sound bite well to an American reader. The answer is compelling portrayals and gripping narrative, accompanied by conflict among

actors on the ground. This can convey the confusion of the situation but also leave the reader with some clarity as to how they should feel about the situation.

I will close with a few examples of how I've stumbled my way to figuring out how to manage some of these tensions. First, you must find characters that do the work for you. This is especially true in magazine writing. The first draft of my book was about twice the size of the final and had much more of my voice guiding people. You could feel how frustrated I was with the policies that I was dissecting. My voice was so present that I got in the way of my own agenda. My readers argued with me instead of with U.S. officials.

So I went back and I rewrote it and eliminated the traces of anger and frustration. The fix was in: I knew what I wanted the reader to feel in reading the book, but I had to give the people who don't do anything about genocide a voice. They make compelling arguments. That is why the outcome is the same again and again, regardless of personalities, party politics at stake, or historical time frame. My job was to give those arguments the floor which they get in real time. I had to be patient and allow the moral power of the losing arguments to reveal itself over time.

I didn't know this going in; I wasn't self-conscious enough to know what it would take to hold onto my readers. Only by going through the writing process did I realize that distance was essential. Allow the character conflict to take hold. Get out of the way. Now the reader goes through Armenia, the Holocaust, and Cambodia. The reasons not to act are clearly articulated and you hear them again and again.

And only by hearing the same rationale again and again and again does the reader begin to grow impatient with them. They realize that policy makers are excluding a vital moral consideration, the consideration of the lives of human beings in these countries.

My second tip is that it helps to find a link to something pertinent, something relevant to the reader. In the case of my book, it's obvious that I cared a lot about genocide, but the link to the reader was America and this was the book's foundation. The book was about America and our role in the world.

So even when I'm writing about the Rwandans, the people that you're going to remember in my writing are the American officials in the government and the UN commander on the ground, General Romeo Dallaire. I give the reader people to whom they can related, people like them, even though ultimately I'm trying to draw the reader's attention toward the people who are being killed.

The third tip I offer is to try to answer a question that has been nagging at people, even if they're not necessarily familiar with the country or its people. While I was working on my book, I became bothered by South African president Thabo Mbeki's AIDS policies. I had heard that he was an AIDS denier, that he believed that poverty, not HIV, caused AIDS. He wasn't giving medicines to his people, and he never gave speeches on AIDS.

Though I had never been to South Africa, it struck me as strange that Mbeki, whom Mandela chose as his successor, would be an AIDS denier. That seemed like a bad thing. So the question, "Why is Thabo Mbeki an AIDS denier?" became a question that I asked others. And everyone would say, "Yeah, you know, I've been wondering that. . . . I keep reading about that and I find it so strange. . . . If you could tell me why, that would be really interesting." If people you know have found themselves puzzling over your question, that's a good sign.

I traveled to Zimbabwe in August and September of last year in order to report on the land seizures, HIV, and famine—how the "bread basket" of Southern Africa was becoming "the basket case."

But who wants to read about Zimbabwe? There was no Al Qaeda connection; there was no American connection; it wasn't even one of the countries to which Bush wanted to give AIDS antiretrovirals. I had a real problem because there wasn't any one new and terrible thing about the situation in Zimbabwe. There was no obvious newsworthiness; it was just a bad situation getting worse and worse.

I tried to create a hook when I pitched the story to my editor at the *Atlantic Monthly*, but as I did it I stopped because I knew how utterly unappealing I was making the story sound. I know my *Atlantic* readers, and the story I was pitching sounded like one they would skip.

In response, my editor ingeniously said "Why don't we make it universal in some way? We know we should care about Zimbabwe, but some of your arguments can be made about other countries. Why don't we turn it into something larger?" He suggested writing the piece as a how-to manual, "Robert Mugabe's 'How to Destroy a Country in Ten Easy Steps.' " That structure worked much better than a traditional account of the suffering and the policies behind it. If you're lucky enough to have the editor who will work with you, you're in an unusual and fortunate place, which is where I am now, thankfully.

Biographical Note

Samantha Power is a lecturer in public policy at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Her recent book, *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide*, was awarded the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction, the 2003 National Book Critics Circle Award for general nonfiction, and the Council on Foreign Relations' Arthur Ross Prize for the best book in U.S. foreign policy. Power was the founding executive director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy (1998-2002). From 1993 to 1996, Power covered the wars in the former Yugoslavia as a reporter for *U.S. News and World Report*, the *Boston Globe*, and *The Economist*. She is the editor, with Graham Allison, of *Realizing Human Rights: Moving from Inspiration to Impact* (St. Martin's, 2000). She has just written a new introduction to Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* and has begun work on a book on the causes and consequences of historical amnesia in American foreign policy.