

Imaging an African Holocaust: The BBC's Institutional Narrative on the Rwandan Genocide 1994-2010

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In the years since the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has been accused of contributing to the British government's disinterest in Rwanda and failure to meet its legal obligation as a signatory of the UN Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948). Yet when the international community finally declared genocide had taken place and recognised its own failure to act, the BBC was quick to change its tact, moving away from reporting ethnic conflict towards memorialising genocide.

The current Rwandan government has come under considerable scrutiny in recent years for its attempts to control the dominant discourse on the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. However, there has been less focus on the struggle for control over this discourse by other nation states and diaspora groups. This paper focuses on the emergence of the BBC's institutional narrative on the Rwandan Genocide. It argues that the process of memorialising genocide in Africa challenges conventional ways of representing Africa – and Africans as less inferior politicians to their western counterparts. The paper maps the ways in which the BBC attempts to retain the status quo by mediatizing a distinctly 'African holocaust'. Contrary to the view that the Rwandan government is influencing British journalists, the BBC is less concerned with the reputation of the current Rwandan government than it is with its own reputation as a global media institution. Referring to the BBC's website, political discussion programmes, feature films and documentary films, the author also suggests that, when it comes to political manoeuvring on the international stage, the BBC has an important role to play in securing a clean image for the UK government.

The evolution of the BBC's institutional narrative should also be understood in the context of the corporation's attitude towards reporting on Africa generally, its efforts to build a presence in the Great Lakes Region and, despite funding from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), its failure to set up a BBC-equivalent in post-genocide Rwanda. The final part of the paper therefore considers how since 1994, narratives on the Rwandan genocide have influenced the way in which conflict in Africa is mediated by the BBC.