



National interest or business interest: coverage of conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo in *The Australian* newspaper

- Virgil Hawkins
Global Collaboration Center, Osaka University, Japan

ABSTRACT

Most of the world's mass media have largely ignored the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), despite the fact that it is by far the deadliest conflict in the world today. Other much smaller conflicts are instead chosen to be the subject of intense focus and attention, ostensibly on grounds of relevance to national interest and humanitarian concern. But neither of these rationales holds up to scrutiny. *The Australian* newspaper is no exception in this sense. This article quantitatively and qualitatively examines coverage of conflict in the DRC in *The Australian*, comparing it with that of other conflicts and crises, primarily Israel–Palestine, Darfur and Zimbabwe. It concludes that some subjective and narrow perceptions of national interest as well as business interests (producing news that 'sells' and following international news flows) serve to explain the DRC's marginalization in *The Australian*.

KEY WORDS • *The Australian* • business interest • conflict • Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) • media • national interest

Introduction

No conflict since the Second World War has caused more death than that in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), with the possible exception of the Korean War. The death toll from conflict in the DRC since 1998 had reached 5.4 million by 2007 (International Rescue Committee [IRC], 2008), while that for the Korean War is estimated at between 4.5 and 7 million. At distant third is the Vietnam War, which was responsible for an estimated 3 million deaths. No conflict in recent years even comes close. Conflict in the DRC is roughly 10 times deadlier than that in Iraq or Darfur, 100 times deadlier than that in

Bosnia, and 1,000 times deadlier than that in Israel–Palestine. The conflict began with an invasion by Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi (ostensibly in support of local rebellions) and quickly drew in as many as five other countries in support of the government, covering a battlefield the size of western Europe. Yet the conflict remains virtually unknown. In the world outside the region, few people appear to know that the conflict ever existed, and fewer that the conflict is the deadliest of our time. The conflict almost never even features in public opinion polls (which is a statement in itself) but small informal surveys suggest that more people (in Australia, for example) think the conflict in Israel–Palestine is deadlier than that in the DRC (Hawkins, 2008: 142–3).

How can a conflict of this magnitude simply slip through the cracks of the world's vast and highly advanced collective information gathering, processing and delivery network, a network that supposedly has the ability to bring more information about more world events to more people than ever before? Clearly, media corporations must bear a large part of the responsibility for this state of affairs. The general public relies heavily on the media for information about the world outside, and for cues on what events and incidents should be considered important (Soroka, 2003). That awareness of conflict in the DRC is so low should come as no surprise when we consider how little coverage there has been of the conflict in the media.

But what is it about the conflict in the DRC that makes it so ignorable? To better understand coverage decisions regarding the DRC, it is useful to take a single example of a media corporation and examine it quantitatively and qualitatively, looking at the coverage devoted to that country, and comparing it to that devoted to other conflicts and crises. An Australian media corporation makes for an interesting example because Australia is geographically distant from most of the world's conflicts, and its government is not a major player in most of them (as belligerent, interested party or peacemaker). It is worth noting that research in the past has found evidence of links between media coverage of foreign countries and volumes of trade, but Australia is one exception (Pietiläinen, 2006). With this considered, a study of a major Australian news corporation can help further understanding of agenda-setting choices in foreign news coverage.

Coverage by *The Australian* of the DRC and other crises in perspective

This section quantitatively and qualitatively examines the coverage of conflict and politics in the DRC by *The Australian* newspaper (the biggest selling national newspaper and the de facto newspaper of record in Australia),

comparing the coverage with that of other conflicts and crises. It will look at these conflicts from the perspective of the overall quantity of coverage and the tone of the coverage, as well as the newspaper's handling of specific types of issues and incidents, namely the total death toll and massacres.

The study used a series of LexisNexis searches to measure the quantity of coverage by *The Australian* of the DRC over nine years of its conflict, as well as for select periods of conflict and/or crisis in Israel–Palestine, Darfur and Zimbabwe. For the DRC, a search was conducted for articles with at least three occurrences (including reference/index terms) of the terms 'Congo' or 'DRC' from 1 August 1998 to 31 July 2007. The articles were then manually divided into those that focused primarily on the conflict and/or politics of the DRC, and those that were only partially relevant or irrelevant to the conflict/politics of the DRC. Searches under similar conditions were conducted for Israel–Palestine beginning at the time of the outbreak of violence from late September 2000; for Darfur, as conflict began to be noticed by the outside world from March 2004; and, for Zimbabwe, during its turbulent election period in 2008. Finally, searches were conducted for articles focusing on Israel–Palestine and for all of Africa in the year 2007. The word counts of the relevant articles were then compiled and compared.

Overall quantity of coverage

The search for coverage of the DRC over the nine-year period beginning in August 1998 revealed a total of 134 articles focusing primarily on the conflict and/or politics of that country, as well as more than one hundred other articles that focused on incidents unrelated to the conflict/politics of the DRC (such as air accidents, mining news, wildlife issues and news involving the neighbouring Republic of Congo), some of which made brief mention of the conflict. Of the 134 articles focusing on the conflict/politics, 41 were small articles of less than 100 words, while 93 were (to varying degrees) somewhat more substantive, ranging from 118 to 833 words. The total word count for all 134 articles was approximately 39,000. Averaged out, this amounts to approximately 360 words per month, which is roughly the size of a single small- to medium-sized article. Roughly half of the months in the period covered contained no articles at all that focused on the conflict or politics of the country. Figure 1 shows the distribution of coverage over the nine years. The three spikes represent the only periods in which coverage was somewhat concentrated (although at relatively low levels): the dramatic outbreak of the conflict, which saw a lightning strike by Rwanda and its proxies, and the rapid expansion of the conflict to a continental level in August 1998; the assassination of President Laurent Kabila in January 2001; and the escalation of

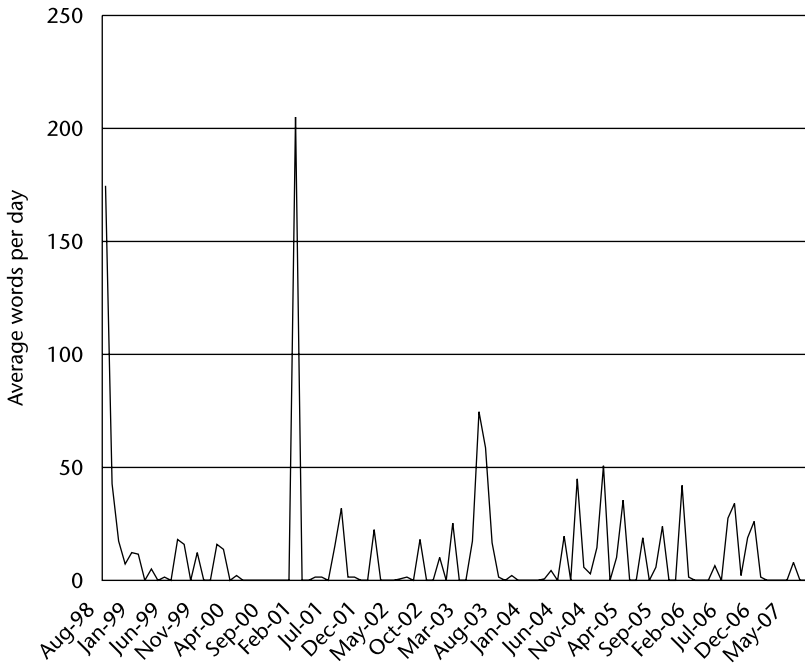


Figure 1 Coverage of conflict in the DRC in *The Australian* (August 1998 to July 2007).

conflict in Ituri in 2003 following the withdrawal of Uganda, leading to the brief deployment of a European force.

To better understand what these figures reveal, it is important to compare them with those of other conflicts and/or crises. The 39,000 words devoted to nine years of conflict and political developments in the DRC is equivalent to approximately one month of coverage of the conflict and political developments in Israel–Palestine in October 2000 as violence broke out there. In that month, coverage averaged more than 1,200 words per day. Comparisons with other African crises also serve to reveal just how little coverage the DRC received. The nine years of coverage of conflict and politics in that country are equivalent to approximately six months (starting from April 2004) of coverage of conflict and politics in Darfur, and to one and a half months of coverage devoted to Zimbabwe in March and April 2008 in the lead-up to and aftermath of elections in that country. The differences in coverage are stark.

The quantity of prominently positioned articles can also reveal the perceived importance of the issue, perhaps most notably whether or not a story is able to make the front page of a newspaper. In this light, it is worth noting that in the nine years covered by the study, conflict in the DRC did not make the front page once. One article focusing on the DRC did appear on the front

page of *The Australian* in 2002, but this was an article focusing on the eruption of a volcano in the country. In comparison, the eruption of conflict in Israel–Palestine was the subject of seven front-page stories in October 2000 alone; conflict in Darfur was on the front page twice in 2004; and news of elections in Zimbabwe in 2008 made the front page six times in nine days. In a similar vein, the DRC has never been the subject of an op-ed article in *The Australian*, although one feature article did point precisely to the problem of the lack of media coverage that the conflict and suffering in DRC could attract (Tom, 2005). This is in sharp contrast to Israel–Palestine, which frequently appears in such opinion sections, and to Darfur and Zimbabwe, which have each inspired a number of op-ed articles.

While some select conflicts and crises in Africa do attract the attention of *The Australian* from time to time, generally coverage of the continent as a whole is very limited. It cannot even begin to compare with coverage for other continents or regions such as the Middle East. A comparison of coverage of conflict and political developments for the year 2007, for example, revealed more coverage for Israel–Palestine alone than that for the entire African continent. Much of the little coverage devoted to Africa in that year was for Zimbabwe and Darfur, and much of the rest was devoted to news about what white people were doing in Africa or how they were being affected by it, rather than news about political developments or issues within the continent itself; a visit by former British Prime Minister Blair, US attacks in Somalia, the British Queen shaking hands with an AIDS patient, a British teacher arrested in Sudan over the naming of a teddy bear, the killing of French tourists in Mauritania, French citizens arrested in Chad over alleged child smuggling, Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor imprisoned in Libya, and a British girl kidnapped in Nigeria.

Tone of coverage

The tone used by *The Australian* in describing the conflict in the DRC was largely a matter-of-fact one, with avoidance of emotive language and individual accounts of suffering usually seen in articles following the something-must-be-done school of journalism (see McLaughlin, 2002: 182–98). Articles focusing on the conflict were primarily short, objective and dispassionate descriptions of relevant incidents and issues: how offensive and defensive manoeuvres by each of the parties were faring; what their leaders were saying; which countries were joining the conflict; the evacuation of Westerners; and the peace process. Refugees, internally displaced people and any relief efforts were almost never mentioned. Importantly, no particular leader, ethnic group or party to the conflict was demonized or seen as bearing responsibility for

the conflict. The leaders of the countries that invaded and occupied the DRC were never saddled with blame or responsibility (no one was: the facts of military advances were simply stated for the record), and no leaders were described using emotive language informing the reader that they were the 'bad guys'.

On very rare occasions, some expressions of humanitarian-based alarm over the conflict have been made. One article in 2000 (*The Australian*) leads with 'Another Rwanda-style crisis is looming in north-eastern Congo, where up to 5000 people have been killed in months of tribal fighting, an international aid agency has warned.' It goes on to describe a 'grisly video of butchered victims and burning villages' made by the same agency. However, despite such expression of alarm, after this article appeared, coverage of the DRC disappeared entirely for almost one month. It was not until some three years after the conflict began that the first one or two articles appeared, focusing on the unparalleled humanitarian cost of the conflict and on accounts of individual suffering. One article (Walsh, 2001), after describing an 'emaciated mother' carrying a dying child in her arms, asserts that:

The full horror of the Congo War ... is finally coming to light. Mass rape, looting and the indiscriminate murder of civilians are emerging as the hidden price of the world's largest, but possibly most bewildering, war.

But despite the 'full horror' apparently having come to light (in fact it had come to light more than a year earlier with the IRC's first mortality survey), following this article, coverage of the conflict in the DRC in any significant quantity (with the exception of one substantive article) disappeared from *The Australian* for almost one year. Another article showing emotive concern was about the battle to save a single baby gorilla found with its shot mother (*The Australian*, 2007b). The article briefly mentions the four million humans who had died as a result of conflict in the area.

In some attempts to explain parts of the conflict, stereotypical primitive 'tribal' references are used as a substitute for political factors. The conflict as a whole appears to be too complex to be explained: it is simply seen as 'bewildering' and is generally left that way, but simplistic images of spontaneous and savage tribal killing caused by ancient cycles of hatred (apparently devoid of politics) serve as a frame for parts of the conflict. Articles focusing on stories of sorcerers being hunted and killed (Dynes, 2001), pygmies being killed (*The Australian*, 2003) and cannibalism (Kerin, 2003) are examples of this. This type of coverage became particularly prominent during the violence preceding the brief intervention of the European force in Bunia in 2003.

How does this tone of coverage compare with that of other African crises, such as Darfur and Zimbabwe? The conflict in Darfur is portrayed in a very

different light from that in the DRC, with a much stronger emphasis on the humanitarian situation and a heavy reliance on a something-must-be-done type of journalism. Titles such as 'Call for Help amid the Deadly Silence in Darfur' (Kaszubska, 2004), 'Humanitarian Disaster Looms in West Sudan' (*The Australian*, 2004a), 'Refugees Escape ... to Hell on Earth' (Clayton, 2004) and 'Sudan's Children Sinking in a Sea of Misery' (Swain, 2004) are indicative of this. Op-ed articles have demanded action and intervention (Albrechtsen, 2005; Bone, 2006). Articles clearly identify the Janjaweed militia and their backers in the Sudanese government as the party to blame, and they are labelled 'demons' (Minitier, 2004), 'the devil' (Stewart, 2004a) and 'the president's thugs' (Stewart, 2004b).

Similar emotive portrayals of suffering are also heavily used in the case of Zimbabwe. Articles with titles such as 'Zimbabwe Mums Beaten by Police' (Raath, 2007), 'Zimbabwe's Women "Brutalised" as Country Collapses' (*The Australian*, 2007c) and 'Girl an Apt Symbol for a Nation Suffering under Mugabe's Rule' (Fletcher, 2008) demonstrate this. In the aftermath of elections in 2008, the situation in Zimbabwe was described as a 'nightmare' against which the 'international community can no longer do nothing' (*The Australian*, 2008b). But perhaps more noteworthy is the heavy use of an array of emotive language (unique for any situation or leader in Africa) demonizing Zimbabwe's President Mugabe. In numerous articles, Mugabe is described as being one or more of the following: tyrant, dictator, despot and autocrat; and his regime brutal, murderous and evil (see, for example, Albrechtsen, 2002; Sheridan, 2006b). A number of articles even raise parallels between Mugabe and Hitler and Stalin (*The Australian*, 2007a).

Coverage of death tolls and massacres

The IRC has conducted five mortality surveys in the DRC, the first of which revealed a death toll of 1.7 million in 2000, making it by far the deadliest conflict since the end of the Cold War. The results of this survey were not reported in *The Australian*. The results of the second survey (2.5 million deaths) were included in an article (Walsh, 2001) but the results of the third survey (3.3 million deaths) were not. The results of the fourth survey (3.8 million deaths) were covered in an article entitled 'Aussie Counts 3.8m Dead in Congo' (Harris, 2004), which focuses on the Australian-ness of the team involved in conducting the survey (five references not including the title) and the hardships they faced, rather than on the conflict itself. When the results of this survey were published in a medical journal (*The Lancet*), the news appeared as a brief (50 words) sandwiched between two other briefs on the plight of celebrities in trouble with the law (*The Weekend Australian*, 2006).

The results of the fifth survey announced in 2008 (5.4 million deaths) were covered in a relatively substantive article focusing on the survey, humanitarian issues and prospects for peace (*The Australian*, 2008a).

Coverage of a much smaller death toll in Darfur has been significantly greater in quantity and considerably more alarming in tone. In July 2004, an article put the death toll at 30,000, and projected that 'we could be looking at 300,000 dead this side of Christmas' (*The Australian*, 2004a). Updates of the death toll regularly appeared in articles: 50,000 in September 2004 (*The Australian*, 2004b), 70,000 in December 2004 (*The Australian*, 2004c), 200,000 in May 2006 (*The Australian*, 2006a) and 300,000 in September 2006 (*The Australian*, 2006b).

Conflict in the DRC has been marked by a large number of massacres, the vast majority of which went unreported in *The Australian*. Of those that were reported, six were announced in news briefs (some with as little as 30 words), while five others were reported in at least one substantive article. Of these five, two were given at least one follow-up article; significant attention was given in particular to the alleged use of vehicles owned by an Australian-based mining firm in a massacre committed by government troops (Strickland, 2005), while the other massacre followed up was framed in the context of the Rwandan genocide (with the killers associated with the Hutu ethnic group and the victims the Tutsi ethnic group). Of the three massacres that were not followed up, one was framed as a hunt for sorcerers, and another (966 killed) was framed as an 'outburst of ethnic violence' in which both the killers and the killed were identified as 'tribesmen' (Dynes, 2003). All accounts of massacres were written in a dispassionate matter-of-fact style, and there were no calls to action.

This is in stark contrast to coverage of massacres elsewhere, such as the alleged massacre of 45 people in the town of Racak in Kosovo in 1999. The incident was announced in an article entitled 'World in Rage over Kosovo Massacre' (Terzieff, 1999) and was followed up by a number of articles, including 'Warning Light On but NATO not Home' (Stevens, 1999), 'Calls Reveal Massacre Order' (*The Australian*, 1999) and 'Grave Reminders of Loss in a Landscape of Grief' (Loyd, 1999). The tone of the articles was often emotive: this massacre was an 'explosion of brutality' and 'hateful slaughter' (Stevens, 1999).

Factors behind the coverage decisions

As the coverage in *The Australian* demonstrates, the actual scale of a conflict or crisis, and the death toll and level of humanitarian suffering caused by it, clearly play little (if any) part in the series of media decisions on whether or

not to cover it. Alarming comments about overall scale, death toll and level of humanitarian suffering may be used, but this is usually to add emotive impact to an article written in a something-must-be-done frame, rather than serving as a reason for the coverage per se (see Johnson, 2007). In Darfur, for example, the 'international community' was apparently 'being shamed into action by a body count too high to ignore' (Stewart, 2004b), yet the body count in the DRC has always far exceeded that in Darfur – by tenfold at the very least.

Such emotive impact is usually achieved with the use of harrowing accounts of suffering at an individual level, and by the use of an array of colourful descriptive words to demonize a particular leader seen as being responsible for suffering in a particular place. The heavy reliance on such techniques reveals little about the overall scale of the world's problems, however, because such harrowing cases of suffering are present in virtually every conflict and crisis, and leaders lacking democratic credentials, who are responsible for the oppression of people under their jurisdiction, are still so plentiful in the world. Darfur is far from being the worst case of conflict in Africa, and Zimbabwe by no means has the most autocratic or oppressive government in Africa: many governments, from Morocco, Libya, Eritrea and Ethiopia, to Guinea, Gabon and Angola, are sorely lacking in democratic credentials; and one has only to browse the country reports of international human rights groups to see how widespread are torture, beatings, extrajudicial execution, arbitrary detention and other forms of oppression. Such a style of coverage simply allows for the perpetuation of a situation of highly selective indignation, in which a few select cases of humanitarian suffering are chosen for concentrated and highly emotive coverage (based on reasons other than overall humanitarian suffering), while the majority of cases (including the world's worst) are either ignored or briefly referred to and written off in a matter-of-fact fashion.

So what are the real determinants of coverage of conflicts and crises? Limited perceptions of Australian national interest and business interests (providing news that 'sells') seem to serve as more plausible explanations for the selection of foreign conflicts and crises by *The Australian*.

Perceptions of national interest

The analysis in the previous section of coverage by *The Australian* shows the marginalization of the DRC, a strong and constant interest in Israel–Palestine, and moderate to strong interest in Darfur and Zimbabwe. Coverage decisions by *The Australian* in this sense seem to closely resemble those of its counterparts in the mainstream media in the UK and USA. This does not necessarily mean that *The Australian* is blindly or reflexively copying the choices made

by these powerful mainstream media corporations. As the newspaper's title suggests, it is meant to be a newspaper for Australians and, as can be seen from the writings of the foreign editor and others, there is a clear belief that one of the newspaper's fundamental purposes is to protect and promote what they perceive to be the interests of the Australian nation. Far from avoiding the use of 'we', 'us' and 'our' in referring to Australia, its people and its interests (on the grounds of journalistic objectivity), foreign editor Greg Sheridan uses these personal pronouns in his pieces proudly and almost reflexively (see, for example, Sheridan, 2006a). Similarly, though not covered specifically in this study, the neighbouring Asia-Pacific region has been a major focus of the newspaper's world coverage, as has Iraq (Australia was one of the belligerent parties involved in the invasion and occupation of that country): which would appear to be consistent with a focus on the national interests of Australia.

But how far can so-called national interest go in explaining the foreign coverage of *The Australian*? National interest refers to the security and survival of a particular state and the protection of its 'vital interests', including physical and economic security and prosperity and, to a degree, the protection and promotion of values that are believed by the people to be important. But the national interest is subjective and fluid, and in the end it can be said that it 'is more likely to be what the policy-makers say it is at any particular time' (Evans and Newnham, 1998: 345). This does not mean that the media has to swallow whole the policy-makers' perceptions of the national interest: many see the role of the media as a watchdog of policy-makers on behalf of the citizenry (Robertson, 2004). But research has found a substantial amount of evidence suggesting that the coverage of events and issues by the media in many cases does indeed mirror the interests of the policy-makers, in what is referred to as 'indexing' (Bennett, 1990).

In the case of *The Australian*, there appears to be a genuine belief that the Middle East is highly important for the national interests of Australia. Sheridan (2008) writes, for example:

The Middle East is an indelible part of Australia's past and of its future. Our strategic engagement there is in the direct defence of our national interests, for the Middle East is the pivot of global conflict.

While one wonders what 'global conflict' means, and why precisely the region is so important for Australia, the belief that it is important is certainly clear. Within the Middle East, Israel appears to have a particular importance for Sheridan and *The Australian*: Sheridan was personally awarded (and accepted) the Jerusalem Prize, which is a prize 'awarded to people who have supported Israel conspicuously', and is sponsored by the Israeli Government and the local Jewish community (Sheridan, 2007). The DRC, on the other hand, has almost

never appeared in opinion pieces that would suggest that it has relevance and, with few exceptions, little is said of the rest of Africa: the perceived lack of importance of the continent appears to be taken for granted.

Just how important are Israel and the Middle East for the defence of Australian national interests, and how unimportant is Africa? Realistically speaking, Australia is not facing (and is unlikely to face) any direct military threat from any country in the Middle East; and although the apparent connection with transnational terrorism (an issue believed to be intensely important for Australia) appears to be strong in the Middle East, major attacks on US and Israeli interests in Kenya and Tanzania, the fact that Al-Qaeda was once based in Sudan, and recent developments in Somalia, all demonstrate that Africa could conceivably be a major concern for Australia. If the concern is oil, it should be noted that Australia obtains the majority of its imports from Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam. Events in the Middle East do indeed affect the global price of oil, but so do many other events and factors that are given very little coverage at all: not least rebel attacks directly targeting oil-extracting infrastructure in Nigeria, attacks so severe that they have cut Nigerian oil exports by a quarter. Incidentally, the USA imports more oil from Africa than it does from the Persian Gulf, and the oil in Africa is generally of higher quality than that in the Middle East. From the perspective of trade, Australia's volume of trade with South Africa, for example, far outweighs that with Israel, in both imports and exports.

With these factors considered, the notion that concern for national interest is able to explain *The Australian's* tendency to allocate more coverage to tiny Israel–Palestine alone than it does to the entire African continent is inconceivable. It is important to look here at political interests (rather than national interests) as an additional source of explanation for some of these coverage patterns. To a certain degree, Israel is seen by policy-makers as being so important because of the political clout of what is loosely described as the Israel lobby (and, to a lesser extent, lobbies supporting the Palestinian cause). The power of such lobbies is exceptionally strong in the USA and Europe (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2006), but they wield considerable influence in Australia as well. While this political clout spills over into the media (in accordance with the aforementioned media's tendency to take cues from their policy-makers), there are also direct pressures from such lobbies within much of the Western media industry as a whole. This series of processes, that seems to have made Israel the unofficial centrepiece of international reporting in much of the world, has become ingrained in journalism over many decades, such that even in the hypothetical absence of such pressures today, the perceived importance of Israel in the media industry as a whole would most

likely go on. Furthermore, the policy-makers' belief in the importance of being a good friend to key allies (namely, the USA and UK) – being interested in issues that are considered important by them – appears to be shared by *The Australian*, which helps cement an intense focus on Israel.

National interest also fails to explain such intense (and ostensibly humanitarian) interest in Zimbabwe and Darfur. Neither situation appears to have any particular importance for the Australian national interest. In the past, Sheridan (2002) has criticized, for example, moves by the Australian Prime Minister to sanction Zimbabwe in the Commonwealth on the grounds that 'No particular Australian interest beyond general humanitarian concern is engaged by Zimbabwe'. Yet coverage of Zimbabwe in *The Australian* has been relatively heavy: far heavier than that of other African countries that potentially do engage Australian interests. Zimbabwe does not threaten Australian security or economic interests, but it does threaten the reputation (and pride) of Australia and of its allies, because President Mugabe is such an outspoken critic (and crucially, an English-speaking one) of many Western policies. His railings against Western interests earned his government considerable attention from the USA, UK and Australian governments, including the label of an 'outpost of tyranny' by the US Secretary of State (apparently the only such outpost in Africa) and concurrently (perhaps consequently) from the media in those countries as well. In the case of the DRC, on the other hand, Rwanda and Uganda, who started the conflict when they invaded and occupied half of that enormous country, are close allies of the USA and the UK, and it has thus served the interests of these countries to keep quiet on the issue (Berkeley, 2001: 237–40; Clark, 2002: 7). Again, the media have followed suit.

Business interests

Perceived national interests aside, mass media is a competitive business and the bottom line is that *The Australian*, like its competitors, is in the business of selling news. It must therefore gather, package and present news that sells, taking into consideration the perceived needs of the customers who buy the newspaper and (probably more importantly) those of the customers who choose to advertise in the newspaper. Such realities serve to better explain the highly selective and disproportionate interest in certain situations of humanitarian concern. Key considerations in this sense are the ability of readers to identify with the issues (and sympathize with the victims), simplicity and sensationalism. This often means framing conflicts in a Hollywood movie-style morality-play format, complete with a villain, an innocent and helpless victim, and hopefully (but not necessarily) a hero to save the day.

The DRC lacks the key ingredients for media interest in this sense. The customers of *The Australian* are seen as having difficulty in identifying racially, ethnically, culturally or socioeconomically, with the participants or victims of black-on-black conflict in impoverished Africa in general. In the case of the DRC, in particular, the key turn-off in terms of news value is the sheer complexity of the conflict, with its many actors taking different sides for a variety of different reasons. While the conflict has been marked by the activities of those who could certainly be identified as 'bad guys', and so many of those dead and maimed could certainly be identified as 'innocent victims', they (inconveniently) cannot easily be categorized into single racial or ethnic groups belonging to the different sides of a simple two-way conflict in which one side must be stopped and the other saved. Coverage of such a complex (and seemingly hopeless) conflict is assumed to confuse, depress and turn off readers, rather than generate interest through the stimulation of a sense of justice and indignation. The occasional story of cannibalism or pygmies being hunted, on the other hand, has a novel and sensational ring that can be seen as generating a macabre interest in readers.

From the perspective of identity, interest in Israel–Palestine is related to religion, in the sense that the area has considerable significance for Christians, Muslims and Jews: it is the so-called 'Holy Land'. But sympathy, simplicity and sensationalism in a morality-play format are not necessarily key aspects in this case. We can see a powerful combination of identity, sympathy, simplicity and sensationalism, on the other hand, in the case of Kosovo. The conflict was established as a clear-cut case of villain (Serbs) against innocent and helpless victim (Albanians). The fact that the victims were white Europeans appeared to help give the conflict significance for distant Australia: conflict in the Balkans had caused so much suffering, (importantly) 'in the heart of Europe' (Sheridan 1999a), and it was Australia's 'duty' to accept refugees from this particular conflict because it 'would be monstrous for them to be mucked around for years in isolated and unsatisfactory refugee camps' (Sheridan, 1999b). These refugees were Australia's 'mates' who deserved a 'fair go' (Sheridan, 1999c). In *The Australian*, such embracing compassion based on general humanitarian concern for refugees from distant conflicts rarely extends to those from Africa, and certainly not to those from the DRC.

The rare African examples of conflict and crisis that do manage to attract the interest of *The Australian* are almost invariably framed in a morality-play format. But for it to be effective (maintaining people's interest), this format cannot be spread thinly: there cannot be too many storylines going on at the same time. The ideal situation is one or two ongoing stories in the spotlight, with a tune-in-again-tomorrow tone, each complete with an easily

identifiable bad guy that the people love to hate – Mugabe in Zimbabwe, the ‘Arabs’ in Darfur. And even in what is essentially black-on-black violence and oppression, ability to identify for the white-dominated audiences is a key factor. It should not be forgotten that Mugabe originally became the representative bad guy of Africa when his policies saw attacks on and eviction of white farmers from their land in Zimbabwe. For Darfur, the conflict was almost completely ignored by *The Australian* for more than a year, and it was only when the conflict was framed as a case of ‘Arab’ aggressor (a group easily associated in the West with terrorism) versus ‘black’ victim, and a case of genocide comparable with that in Rwanda (the object of residual guilt in the West), that it began to attract coverage.

Once a long-term decision has been made on the importance of a particular country or region (for whatever reason), its effects continue to reverberate in the media agenda, sometimes because of the perceived need for a small number of ‘known’ storylines, but also sometimes because of a simple business decision based on considerations of timing and cost. This is seen clearly in the link between coverage decisions and the presence of a bureau in a particular area or region. With *The Australian* having a correspondent based in Jerusalem, its decision to cover an event in Israel–Palestine is a relatively easy one: gathering ‘fresh’ news on a known topic at a minimal cost is easily achieved. With not a single bureau anywhere in Africa, a decision not to cover conflict in the DRC is also a relatively easy one: the time and cost required to gather (not-so-fresh) information about a conflict that has a history of being ignored (and is therefore unknown) is very rarely seen as being worth the time, cost and trouble to travel there from a distant bureau, regardless of the scale of the problem.

But there is more to the business issue than simply weighing cost against the perceived news value of a story. News media agendas in the West as a whole are highly assimilated, with ownership of media corporations increasingly concentrated in fewer hands, heavy reliance on similar sources and a general pack (or bandwagon) mentality among media corporations. When these aspects of the international news flow are considered, it is clear that it is no accident that the conflicts and crises *The Australian* has chosen for concentrated attention and selective indignation are found to be the same as those chosen by other mainstream Western media corporations.

The Australian is owned by Rupert Murdoch, who is notorious for his neo-conservative political views and (more importantly here) exceptionally tight corporate control over the editorial policies of the numerous media corporations he owns throughout the world, achieved through key editorial appointments, close editorial supervision and senior management conferences (Knight, 2006: 119–22). Accordingly:

his views are the company's views ... No one else has his global reach, nor his ability to breathe in and have all his media outlets exhale in time. When Murdoch decided to back the war in Iraq, 175 of his editors did the same. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2006)

Although originally an Australian citizen, Murdoch became an American citizen in 1985 and has strong business interests in (and political connections with) the USA and UK, as well as in Australia, which also helps to explain the striking resemblance between the media agenda (choice of foreign affairs topics and their framing) of *The Australian* and the agenda of mainstream media corporations in the USA and UK.

It is also interesting to take note of the sources used for many foreign stories in *The Australian*. Many of the newspaper's articles are not written by its own reporters, but are bought from elsewhere, including Reuters, Agence France-Presse (AFP), Associated Press (AP) and *The Times*. This reflects a limited ability to gather news (undoubtedly related to financial constraints), but it hardly reduces the responsibility of *The Australian* for the choice of the news it publishes: news about the DRC and any other country in the world is regularly available, much of it even from sources regularly used by *The Australian*. News is included and excluded by choice, not by availability. News agendas in the mainstream Western press in general are highly assimilated, partially because they are using the same sources, but also largely because of pack journalism and the bandwagon effect observed in the process of intermedia agenda-setting. As McCombs (2004) notes: 'Journalists frequently observe – and subsequently copy – their peers' news coverage in order to validate their own news judgements about the day's events' (p. 113). It is the agendas of the most powerful news corporations that are copied: they serve to validate the newsworthiness of a particular topic.

Conclusions

The Australian has chosen to largely marginalize what is by far the world's deadliest conflict: that in the DRC. On the other hand, it has focused intensely on the situation in Israel–Palestine, which it apparently perceives as being greatly important to Australian national interests. It has also shown strong and emotive interest in select African conflicts and crises (namely Darfur and Zimbabwe) that it acknowledges as having little relevance to Australian national interests, apparently on general humanitarian grounds. But humanitarian concern fails to explain this interest when a much worse humanitarian situation in the DRC is largely ignored. Business interest (providing news that 'sells' as well as international news flow) serves as a much more plausible

reason for these choices. There is nothing particularly unique about these coverage decisions made by *The Australian*, and this particular news corporation is not deliberately being singled out for criticism. Conversely, in terms of coverage of foreign conflicts, *The Australian* serves as a very representative example of a highly assimilated Western news media agenda, created by narrow perceptions of national interests by the powerful agenda-setters, and similarly as an ex-ample of the power of business decisions in determining what news is deemed important.

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Biographical note

Virgil Hawkins is an assistant professor at the Global Collaboration Center, Osaka University, Japan. His primary research interest is in the response to foreign conflict (particularly the lack thereof) by key actors in the world, including policymakers, the media, the public and academia. He is also author of *Stealth Conflicts: How the World's Worst Violence Is Ignored* (Ashgate, 2008).

Address: Global Collaboration Center, Osaka University, 302 Osaka University Nakanoshima Center, 4-3-53 Nakanoshima, Kita-ku, Osaka, Japan, 530-0005. [email: Hawkins@glocol.osaka-u.ac.jp]