

"Kill the Messenger" examines media in crisis situations

"Kill the Messenger: The Media's Role in the Fate of the World"

Author: Maria Armoudian

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In true journalist fashion, Maria Armoudian uses compelling language and personal stories to make a gripping connection of a much larger picture.

In approximately 300 thoroughly researched pages, Armoudian takes us around the world – from Rwanda, Senegal, Taiwan, Bosnia, Chile and Mexico, to Northern Ireland, Nazi Germany, and South Africa – through the experiences of individuals, and illustrates the influence and inherent power media have played (both good and bad) in instances of crisis and conflict throughout history.

Kill the Messenger reveals how media affect our lives, from our politics and beliefs to our actions.

In Rwanda, Hutu financially and politically controlled media lent itself to the desensitization of Tutsi people as human beings, making them seem "so despicable that many Hutus came to believe their 'single job was to crush the cockroaches.'" The radio station, RTLM, marketed itself as being "the voice of the people," but in between the entertainment, popular songs and breaking news was "an intense campaign designed to evoke passion, pride, hatred and dedication for a murderous cause" and "to convert the annihilation of others into a noble act." Armoudian describes the genocide being performed with a

machete in one hand and radio in the other.

Media, however, have also positioned themselves as peacekeepers, a fact Armoudian illustrates through recountings of averting genocide in Burundi and the peace agreement in Belfast.

Kill the Messenger serves only as an introduction to each scenario, a limitation Armoudian owns up to in the preface.

Armoudian described media as being “DNA for social systems, offering us the codes and information by which we organize ourselves.” And the face of media is forever changing – an evolution that has taken us from the printing press to the “tweet” – allowing for a more interactive experience. A political debate can now

be followed live through Twitter or the Internet, instead of read about in the next morning’s edition. Cell phone cameras and YouTube have advanced citizen journalism, providing one more alternative to mainstream media. These new mediums have opened new avenues for dissemination that would have otherwise been unavailable. Through *Kill the Messenger*, Armoudian positions herself as a media reformer. She gives a disturbing account of media’s role in a handful of the world’s atrocities. She then explains how media are intertwined within society. To better one is to better both. In Rwanda, an impartial media would not have advocated the killing of fellow men, thus it would not have been the widely-used weapon it became.

Armoudian demands readers examine motives behind the current producers of media, only excepting objective news from “trustworthy” sources. This leads to the last chapter, where Armoudian recommends a new “conscience.” Through a self-proclaimed “constructionist” approach, Armoudian recognizes “the media are one of many integral forces that shape the present and future and which are, in turn, shaped by social

and political forces.”

Armoudian proposes to “kill the messenger” – today’s media paradigm. Armoudian declares that journalists are not neutral, but shaped by the questions they ask, the sources they rely on, and events they focus on. Although she admits these frames are usually built unintentionally, they still “support, legitimize or delegitimize” the ideologies of the culture within which they are embedded.

She offers four, seemingly obvious, shifts in media to “kill the messenger.”

1. Disseminating a fuller range of important information and perspectives
2. Offering deeper understandings about sociopolitical issues
3. Featuring well-considered, rational or emotionally solutions
4. Airing the exemplars, offering models and legitimacy for “higher” values and pursuits and those who exhibit them.

While Armoudian admits this is easier said than done, her call to action could not be clearer.