

# Peace Journalism: Between advocacy journalism and constructive conflict coverage

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## 1. Journalism or Public Relations?

The term “Peace Journalism” combines two elements that are difficult to harmonize: “Peace” and “Journalism.”

Journalism is a form of public communication that is subject to professional norms. Because of these norms it differs from other types of public communication, for example, Public Relations.

The professional norms of good journalism include in particular the following: truthfulness, objectivity, neutrality and detachment. For Public Relations these norms are at best irrelevant. The only thing that matters is success. And this success is measured in terms of achieving specific communication aims which are “externally defined by a client, host organization or particular groups of stakeholders” (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 2). Typical aims are, e.g., to convince the public of the attractiveness of a product, of the justice of one’s own political goals or also of the wrongfulness of a political opponent.

Good Journalism differs from Public Relations precisely because it does not aim to influence the public, but rather pursues only the goal of reporting truthfully about reality. As David Loyn (2003), a BBC correspondent and prominent critic of Peace Journalism, has maintained: “Our task is always to seek to find out what is going on, not carrying any other baggage” (n. p.).

Good Journalism has just one aim: to represent reality accurately. The other characteristics of good journalism—objectivity, neutrality and detachment—are means to reach this aim (Loyn, 2007).

Peace Journalism combines journalism with peace as an external aim. It understands itself as “a normative mode of responsible and conscientious media coverage of conflict that aims at contributing to peacemaking, peacekeeping, and changing the attitudes of media owners, advertisers, professionals, and audiences towards war and peace” (Shinar, 2007).

A goal conflict arises out of this that arouses concern that Peace Journalism “could compromise the integrity of journalists and confuse their role as neutral disseminators of facts” (Loyn, 2003).

This concern is all the more justified because some supporters of Peace Journalism seem all too inclined to underrate values like objectivity, neutrality and detachment (e.g., Mc Goldrick, 2006; Peleg, 2007) and to lump Peace Journalism together with other terms (e.g., Shinar, 2007) “that refer to advocacy models of reporting—such as the ‘journalism of attachment’ (Bell, 1997), ‘victim journalism’ (Hume, 1997), ‘justice journalism’ (Messman, 2001), and ‘engaged journalism’ (Lynch, 2003).” According to Lynch & McGoldrick (2005), “Peace Journalism is when editors and reporters make choices—of what stories to report, and how to report them.”

The two together, disregarding the tools of good journalism and understanding peace journalism as a form of advocacy journalism, create a dangerous mix which is prone to abuse the noble goal of peace as a legitimation for biased coverage. Journalism of this kind “will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor” (Bell, 1997, 8). Where this can ultimately lead has been shown in a fateful manner by the journalism of attachment.

When journalists go on a “crusade against conventional reporting” (Peleg, 2007), they all too easily become recruits for the propaganda war (Kempf, 2003). But Peace Propaganda is nothing other than propaganda either, and a Peace Journalism that crosses the border to propaganda does not deserve to bear the name of journalism. According to a proposal by Thomas Hanitzsch (2007), it ought to be banished to the domain of Public Relations.

A Peace Journalism that deserves the name is only conceivable as good journalism and requires more than just good will and a moral impetus.

## 2. Journalistic Responsibility

Impartiality and objectivity are indispensable tools of good journalism, and David Loyn is right when he concludes that the reporter’s tools need to be sharpened, not altered. “Rather than disregard the concept, it is more fruitful to consider the structures that support better or worse practice” Loyn, 2007, n. p.).

As soon as we call for better practice, however, it turns out that truth or truthfulness are not values in themselves. The striving for truth in particular meets an obvious practical need. Truthfulness makes it possible to add to our knowledge stock the experiences of others as guides for our own actions. Since we draw on them all the time, reliance on the assertions of others is an indispensable element of our own everyday life practice. That is, there is a justified interest in being sure that only statements will be made that can be defended in every case (and not just to uncritical or uninformed opponents) (cf. Kambartel, 1968).

This applies in particular to the assertions of journalism, and even more so to conflict journalism. War and peace are events of existential significance that no one can disregard.

When Jörg Becker (2002) maintains that the media have a political obligation to participate in and stand up for peace of their own accord, this is not just the opinion of a German political scientist, but rather the consensus of the legal framework and codes of conduct established by international and national law, trade unions and responsible media institutions.

Art. 3 of the 1978 UNESCO Media Declaration, for instance, states that, “the mass media have an important contribution to make to the strengthening of peace and international understanding and in countering racialism, apartheid and incitement to war” (UNESCO, 1979, p. 102). Also the numerous ethical codes for journalists that apply in almost all the countries of the world give expression to similar self-imposed obligations and contain the obligation to act for peace and against any kind of war propaganda (cf. Becker, 2004).

David Loyn (2007) also honors these codes of conduct for providing a framework which enables journalists to engage in robust skeptical inquiry, but also to comply with libel laws and remain on the right side of civilized discourse.

Even if he fears that “highly prescriptive rules might inhibit good journalism,” Loyn has thereby approached a perspective that sees no insurmountable conflicts between objectivity and normativity. And with the insight that “a side-effect of my reporting may be that it makes conflict resolution harder or easier,” Loyn comes closer to peace journalism than he thinks.

Journalists are responsible for the way, for how they report; and even the creation of “opportunities for society at large to consider and to value non-violent responses to conflict,” as called for by Lynch & McGoldrick (as quoted in McGoldrick 2006, p. 4), is not an external goal imposed on journalism from outside. The obligation to create these opportunities results directly from the role assigned to journalism in democratic societies.

In that Loyn regards the above-named “side-effects” of journalistic work as mere ‘collateral damage’ which is to be investigated later, “after our reporting” (Loyn, 2007), he thereby not only distances himself from the concept of – however understood – peace journalism, but rather also attacks the model of good journalism that he intends to defend against it.

Of course professional journalists do not set out to reduce conflict. They seek to present accurate and impartial news coverage. But it is often through good reporting that conflict is reduced (Howard, 2003), and what is demanded is no more than responsible journalism. Without responsibility, good journalism is inconceivable.

Thus we replace David Loyn’s (2007) provocative dichotomy of “good journalism or peace journalism” with the normative formula “good journalism = responsible journalism = peace journalism.”

### 3. War Discourse vs. Peace Discourse

Implying that both good journalism and peace journalism need a more sophisticated approach, this formula is no less provocative. Indeed, the idea behind this formula has inspired the work of generations of media researchers and journalists who have criticized the media for falling into the propaganda trap.

David Loyn has a point when he argues that journalistic practices which commit themselves to the adoption of particular perspectives are bound to be less objective than others. But the proximity of mainstream conflict coverage and war propaganda shows that it is not peace journalism which is tied to the adoption of a particular perspective, but on the contrary: the traditional tools of journalism are not sufficient to guarantee good journalism. While “reporters live in a social context and share a language and certain assumptions with their audience” (Loyn, 2007, p. 5), “propaganda sets out precisely to penetrate and transform shared language and assumptions” (Lynch, 2007, p. 3).

While in principle conflict is open to interpretation as either a competitive (win-lose) or a cooperative (win-win) process (Deutsch, 1973), conventional war discourse, as initiated by political and military elites and adopted by mainstream journalism and its public, is all about the questions: “Who is the aggressor?” and “How can he be stopped?”

Whether deliberately or not, by adopting this particular perspective, societal discourse reduces conflict to a zero-sum game and becomes a motor of conflict escalation (Kempf, 2003).

Only if it goes beyond such win-lose scenarios can journalism contribute to the transformation of war discourse into a more constructive form of discourse which is guided by questions like: “What is the problem?” and “How can it be resolved?” Broadening the perspective on conflict and opening it to peaceful alternatives, therefore, is the very essence of de-escalation oriented conflict coverage, which I have suggested as a first step of peace journalism (cf. Kempf, 2003).

This is neither a highly prescriptive rule which might inhibit good journalism, nor does it imply that we should adopt a particular perspective. On the contrary, it is a rule which only forbids the unacceptable. It is a rule which enjoins journalists to not limit their perspective to that of the war-making elites. It is a rule which prohibits volunteering on the propaganda front.

If this is how we understand it, peace journalism is not an antipode, but rather a necessary prerequisite of good journalism.

If this is what we aim at, we must make clear, however, that our understanding of peace journalism is completely different from the way some of its adherents and critics have interpreted Galtung’s demand that journalists should become active participants, playing a part in the complex ‘cat’s cradle’ that makes up a conflict.

David Loyn (2007) is right when he states that reporting and peacemaking are different roles, and that peacemaking is simply not the journalist’s role. In addition, it cannot be the function of journalism to mediate between conflict parties, to sit down at a negotiating table with them and moderate their disputes (Kempf & Jaeger, 2005).

Journalism and the media do, however, play an essential role in the societal construction of reality that can be fulfilled in different ways: Through the type of news coverage chosen they can give an impetus either to the escalation or to the de-escalation of conflicts.

So viewed, journalism also does not have to be first an active participant playing a part in the complex ‘cat’s cradle’ that makes up a conflict. It already is and always will be. What peace journalism demands of it is merely to assume responsibility for how it fulfills this role.

### 4. New Wine in Old Bottles?

Already Gjelten (2001) pointed out that there is no necessity for journalists to place their professional abilities in the service of either conflict resolution or prevention: They must simply do their work better – in the frame of the traditional standards of their profession. But if peace journalism is nothing other than good journalism, isn’t this just old wine in new bottles, as Thomas Hanitzsch (2007) has criticized? No, it is not. For the fulfillment of these standards presupposes specific conflict competencies, and whether journalists possess or acquire these competencies should not be left to chance (Kempf & Jaeger, 2005).

To study the conditions and possibilities under which journalists can actually perform their work better, even in war and crisis situations, and to provide the necessary competencies: this is how I understand the program of peace journalism.

David Loyn (2007) also claims that journalists need methods for a more complex understanding of context and would be more likely to be accurate and impartial if they, and their editors, had an understanding of their own psychology and blind spots, and of the psychology of the news story and its actors.

Journalists are themselves members of society and are subject not only to certain institutional pressures (Bläsi, 2006), but also to the same social-psychological mechanisms as other people, particularly to the competitive misperceptions (Deutsch, 1973) which, so to speak, adjust automatically with their own involvement in escalating conflict (Kempf, 2002, KEMPF 2003).

Although Thomas Hanitzsch (2007) is right in claiming that there are manifold nuances in the media, it cannot be ignored that typical mainstream coverage reduces conflicts to force and violence. It contains little knowledge of the dynamics of conflict and no ideas for alternatives to violence. Even journalists who feel committed to traditional standards of truth and objectivity tend to paint pictures in black and white, often reducing conflicts to simple antagonisms in order to make news stories more exciting, and the conflict more understandable for their public.

Intractable conflicts are demanding, stressful, painful, exhausting and costly in both human and material terms. This requires that societal members develop conditions to facilitate successful coping. One aspect of the conditions provided by war culture is a psychological infrastructure that consists, for example, of commitment to one's own side and its leadership, the maintenance of its objectives, high motivation to contribute, perseverance and readiness for personal sacrifice (Bar-Tal, 1998).

All these mechanisms lend plausibility to an escalation-prone misrepresentation of reality which is typical of mainstream conflict coverage and requires special efforts to overcome.

Thomas Hanitzsch (2004a) also agrees: "What we need is more quality in journalism" (p. 205). Nothing needs to be added to this other than that it is precisely in conflict coverage that this quality does not establish itself on its own. Professional norms are necessary, but not sufficient to guarantee good journalism and a more constructive mode of conflict coverage (Shinar, 2007). In order to produce good journalism, journalists need knowledge, competencies and qualifications that go beyond traditional journalistic training and enable them to counteract the escalation-prone misperceptions of reality I mentioned before.

## 5. Misrepresentation of Reality?

While truthfulness is a shared goal which unites most adherents (e.g., Lynch, 2007) and critics (e.g., Loyn, 2007) of peace journalism, it has been challenged by Thomas Hanitzsch (2007), who insists that any objections to a 'media-biased reality' miss the point.

Hanitzsch's arguments are inconsistent and contradictory, however. While he originally held that the version of reality constructed by war reporting is as compatible with classical standards of truth as countless other versions (Hanitzsch, 2004b, 185), he now draws on Schudson (2003) and claims that "every representation of the world is inevitably biased" (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 5).

The only thing consistent in Hanitzsch's arguments is that he uses the social construction of reality as grounds to dispute the right to any critique of the media.

But can subjective realities – and particularly the one version of reality which is constructed by war reporting – really not be criticized? Can we really not speak meaningfully of misrepresenting reality?

As I have shown elsewhere (Kempf, 2006a), Hanitzsch's argumentation is based on a large number of methodological errors: It is based on an inadequate and logically incorrect understanding of truth and reality, and on a lack of differentiation between facts and meanings, between truth and beliefs, and between objective and subjective realities.

In particular, it is wrong to label the reality constructed by the media as true or false per se. The media construction of reality is a matter of meaning-making, and a dispute about its adequacy can only be a dispute which relates it to something outside itself: the facts upon which it rests, the goals it serves and/or the rules it follows.

Only the first of these criteria, the factual basis of media-constructed reality, has to do with truthfulness and objectivity. And as far as facts are concerned, Hanitzsch (2007) is right that media accounts of the facts can be substantiated in everyday journalism only through their coherence with other facts, that is, with what we already know. But this is just as

little a counter-argument as the circumstance that we base our constructions of reality on a factual foundation which always remains incomplete.

To criticize the media because they do not possess pure and complete truth would be quite naïve. But this is not the point when Galtung (2002) criticizes the media for reducing conflict to a zero-sum game, or when Jake Lynch (2007) asserts that journalism needs some practical way to analyze and address its own role in creating realities, etc.

What peace journalism criticizes about the media is, to be sure, that specific facts are systematically concealed. But even here the critique is not primarily of the facts themselves, but rather of the escalation potential that unfolds from ascribing meanings that translate the mix of reported and suppressed facts into a comprehensible narrative.

Conflict is an interactive process, and like all human actions it involves (at least) three different kinds of reality. There is one party's subjective reality and the subjective reality of an opponent. While both these realities can only be assessed from within the respective party's perspective, the third kind of reality can only be assessed from an external perspective and shows how subjective realities interact with each other.

In order to evaluate the escalation or de-escalation potential of the conflict parties' reality constructions, an external perspective is needed. And from this external perspective, we may well criticize some reality constructions as biased toward promoting conflict and appreciate others as more balanced and open-minded.

When Thomas Hanitzsch (2007) claims that such an external perspective is neither needed nor possible, he is thereby not just throwing overboard the claim to deliver a balanced and comprehensive account of conflict. He is also depriving editors of any basis upon which they could fulfill their role to make a judgement without siding with one particular version of reality (Loyn, 2007). Not just peace journalism, but any type of good journalism is thereby rejected.

## 6. Naive and Illusory?

In order to support his rejection, Hanitzsch (2007) imputes to peace journalism an "overly individualistic and voluntaristic perspective, which seems to suggest that journalists only need to change their attitudes and behaviors, and as a result they will produce conflict coverage that embraces the values of peace journalism" (p. 5).

There are in fact many structural constraints which shape and limit the work of journalists: constant time pressure, chronic lack of space, limited budget, censorship and disinformation, editorial staff expectations, the needs of the public, the laws of the market, etc. On the basis of a systematic analysis of the process of producing conflict coverage and a great number of expert interviews with experienced conflict reporters from radio, television and the print media, Burkhard Bläsi (2004, 2005, 2006) has dealt in great detail with this and studied the suitability of peace journalistic models for practice. Constructive conflict coverage proves accordingly to have future prospects that can, however, only gain broader influence through permanent changes in specific journalistic routines, attitudes and competencies.

Robert Hackett (2006) has also thought critically about the prospects of realizing the principles of peace journalism in practice. His theoretical study considers three conceptual frameworks for analyzing the relationship between journalism and other relations and institutions of power in order to identify the tasks, challenges and potential strategies for the peace journalism movement: Herman & Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model, Shoemaker & Reese's (1996) hierarchy of influences model and Pierre Bourdieu's (1998) notion of journalism as a field. According to Hackett's analysis, the barriers to peace journalism include the difficulties of constructing 'peace' as a compelling narrative, the national basis (and biases) of much of the world's news media and their publics, the ideological and structural links between media corporations and states, and the embeddedness of dominant media and states in relations of inequality. Nonetheless, he concludes that there are many niches in the system where it is possible to practice and find a constituency for different and experimental forms of journalism.

Peace journalism is not as naïve as Hanitzsch assumes. But Hanitzsch (2007) has taken account neither of the work of Bläsi and Hackett nor of the basic research on the acceptance and effects of peace journalism.

One of his chief arguments is that "the mainstream media can ill afford to abandon news values, as this would jeopardize the economic base on which they are forced to operate" (p. 5). This is a serious argument, and peace journalistic basic research has been working on this already for some time – not only theoretically, but also with a range of empirical and experimental studies. Even if a final assessment can still not be made, it appears that Hanitzsch's recommendation of holding to traditional news factors is based, on the one side, on an inaccurate portrayal of news factors as absolute and, on the other side, on a naturalistic error.

Recent studies of news coverage on the Middle East conflict during the Israeli-Palestinian peace process (Annabring, 2000; Kempf, 2003) and of German press coverage of France after the Second World War (Jaeger, 2003, 2004, 2005) have shown that news factors are not rigid entities, but rather are dealt with by the media in quite flexible ways.

Beyond this, it is logically inadmissible to infer from the way media news coverage is that this is what the media public wants. Even if one thinks that news factors are “selection structures of public communication whose scope includes not only journalism, but also its public” (Hanitzsch, 2004b, 188), this cannot obscure the fact that news factors theory was only derived from the content analytic study of media news coverage and not, for example, from a study of public preferences.

Recent studies show, however, that the public is much less oriented in its preferences to news factors like simplification, negativism and personalization than is commonly assumed. Thus Wolling (2002) found that information quality is an essential factor for the evaluation of news coverage programs, and as Eilders (1997) has shown, the better they are already informed, the less readers orient themselves to traditional news factors.

As experimental studies have demonstrated (Bläsi, Jaeger, Kempf & Spohrs, 2005; Jackson, 2006; Kempf, 2005, 2006b; Möckel, 2007; Schaefer, 2006; Sparr, 2004, Spohrs, 2006), traditional escalation-oriented conflict coverage is in fact not better suited to awakening reader interest, but rather de-escalation oriented peace journalism has the same potential. De-escalation oriented coverage is not only perceived by recipients as more balanced, it also awakens greater interest in further information.

Not only the media, but also the public are much more flexible than news factors theory claims, and peace journalism does have a public. Recipients are also more competent and more interested in differentiated conflict representation than is commonly assumed.

## 7. Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be maintained that there are definite chances for the practical implementation of the peace journalistic program, and it can make an urgently needed contribution to assuring the quality of conflict and crisis journalism. That in the foreseeable future peace journalism will remain in a minority position need not represent an obstacle. Even from this position it can contribute to structuring media discourse on conflicts in a more transparent and balanced way and to protecting conflict coverage from the fateful propaganda traps into which traditional war reporting seems to be continually falling (Jaeger, 2002).

As preconditions for this I see only two things: First, there is a need for a further intensification of basic peace journalistic research and the critical examination of so many myths which journalism shares with media studies. News factors and public preferences are, for one thing, two different things which must be kept separate; good journalism is not a description of the current state of conflict coverage, but is, in contrast, only practiced by relatively few journalists, and the professional norms and tools of journalism are, of course, indispensable, but not sufficient to ensure good journalism.

Second, however, caution is imperative, so that the critique of the journalistic mainstream does not throw the baby out with the bath-water. Thus it is not only appropriate, but also urgently necessary to question the conventional journalistic understanding of objectivity (see McGoldrick, 2006), to free it of its inadequacies and constructively further develop it. To radically turn away from the call for objectivity, as suggested by Lynch & McGoldrick (2005) or Hackett (2006), not only endangers the acceptance of the peace journalistic project in the journalistic community, however, but also twists peace journalism into a form of advocacy journalism, which leads directly to PR and propaganda and can squander the trust bonus which its recipients grant to peace journalism.

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