

## Chapter 8

# High Road, Low Road: Charting the Course for Peace Journalism

Imagine a blackout on everything we associate with medical practice; never to be reported in the media.<sup>1</sup> Disease, however, is to be reported fully, in gruesome detail, particularly when elite persons are struck. The process of disease is seen as natural, as a fight between the human body and whatever is the pathogenic factor, a micro-organism, trauma, stress and strain. Sometimes one side wins, sometimes the other. It is like a game, even like a sports game. Fair play means to give either side a fair chance, not interfering with the ways of nature where the stronger eventually wins. The task of journalism is to report this struggle objectively, hoping that our side, the body, wins.

That kind of journalism would be disease-oriented, and the journalist could refer to himself as a disease journalist or correspondent. He would be firmly rooted in the tradition of midwifing negative events hitting elites into news. His concern would not be to highlight how diseases might be overcome, except by means as violent as the disease itself (open heart surgery, chemo- or radiotherapy.) The softer approaches would go under-reported; so would anything known as preventive medicine.

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<sup>1</sup> This text was first published as: “Constructive approaches to community and political conflict”, in: *Track Two*, Vol 7, No 4, December 1998, pp. 7-10.

Fortunately, reporting on health and disease has liberated itself from that fatalistic tradition. There is also a clear tradition of health journalism.<sup>2</sup> But there is not, yet, a corresponding tradition of ‘peace journalism’ whereas ‘war and violence journalism’ seem to be in good standing. But exactly what could be the content of that concept, peace journalism?

In general there seem to be two ways of looking at a conflict, the high road and the low road, depending on whether the focus is on the *conflict* and its *peaceful transformation*, or on the meta-conflict that comes after the root conflict, created by *violence* and *war*, and the question of who wins. Media even confuse the two, talk about conflict when they mean violence.

*The low road*, dominant in the media, sees a conflict as a battle, as sports arena or gladiator circus. The parties, usually reduced to two, are combatants in a struggle to impose their goals. The reporting model is that of a military command: who advances, who capitulates short of their goals; counting the losses in terms of numbers killed, wounded, and material damage. The zero-sum perspective draws upon sports reporting where “winning is not everything, it is the only thing”. The same perspective is applied to negotiations as verbal battles: who outsmarts the other, who comes out closest to his original position. War journalism has sports journalism, and court journalism!, as models.

*The high road*, the road of peace journalism, would focus on conflict transformation. Conflicts would be seen as a challenge to the world, like having 2,000 nations wanting a nation-state in a world with only 200 countries, and only 20 nation-states. As people, groups, countries, and groups of countries seem to stand in each other’s way (that is what conflict is about) there is a clear *danger* of violence. But in conflict there is also a clear *opportunity* for human progress, using

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<sup>2</sup> An example would be the excellent Health (and Science) page in the *International Herald Tribune*, which could serve as a good model for a Peace/Conflict Transformation page, filled with information, reports on new thinking, critical evaluation. To explore this analogy consider the typical finding from a UCLA study about TV violence as reported in *Washington Post*, 6 February 1996, “Study Finds Real Harm in TV Violence”:

- “Perpetrators of violent acts on TV go unpunished 73 % of the time”, “When violence is presented without punishment, viewers are more likely to learn the lesson that violence is successful”.
- Most violent portrayals fail to show the consequences of a violent act, “no harm to the victims” (47 %), “no pain” (58 %).
- Few programmes (only 4 %) emphasize nonviolent alternatives to solving problems. Translated into illness/health reporting this means:
  - Nothing is done about a disease 73 % of the time;
  - Disease does no harm (47 %), leaves no pain (58 %);
  - There is no alternative to disease, such as prevention (96 %).
  - Centuries ago this was an adequate description of attitudes to illness/health: little was done, disease is bad luck. That has fortunately changed, but violence in the media has continued unabated; see Thomas E. Radecki, “Violent Behavior Images Diet of Media Violence”, *Social Alternatives*, May 1987, pp 8–21.

the conflict to find new ways, being imaginative, creative, transforming the conflict so that the opportunities take the upper hand. Without violence.

There is no argument that violence should not be reported. *But the first victim in a war is not truth that is only the second victim. The first victim is, of course, peace.* Good reporting—low or high road—should obviously be truthful. But truth journalism alone is not peace journalism. And truth does not come easily given the tendency to take sides once the “who wins” perspective has been adopted. If one side is backed by one’s own country, nation, class or paper/station/channel, the low road invites untruthfulness, as witnessed in the Gulf, Somalia and Yugoslavia wars.

Here is a short list of tasks for peace correspondents, elaborated below:

- [1] What is the conflict about? Who are the parties, what are their real goals, counting the parties beyond the conflict arena where the violence, if any, takes place? The list is often long.
- [2] What are the deeper roots of the conflict, in structure and culture, including the history of both?
- [3] What kind of ideas exist about other outcomes than one party imposing itself on the other, particularly creative, new ideas? Can such ideas be sufficiently powerful to prevent violence?
- [4] If violence occurs, how about such invisible effects as trauma and hatred, and the wish for revenge and for more glory?
- [5] Who are working to prevent violence, what are their visions of conflict outcomes, their methods, how can they be supported?
- [6] Who initiate reconstruction, reconciliation and resolution, and who are only reaping benefits like reconstruction contracts?

More reporting of this kind, and the conflict in and over Northern Ireland would have entered a more peaceful phase long ago. Focus on the violence of IRA/RUC only hid the conflict and nourished more violence. Focus on nonviolent outcomes, empathy with all parties, creativity: and peace may come.

Building on this introduction, Table 8.1 is an effort to fill both concepts with operational content<sup>3</sup>:

Good reporting on conflict is not a compromise, a little from the left hand column, a little from the right, but favours peace journalism and opposes war journalism. If a society sees a need for war reporting, better leave it to the ministries of (dis)information, of defence (war), of foreign affairs, etc. Do not corrupt the media by giving the task to them, having them take it on voluntarily, or forcing

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<sup>3</sup> Lest the journalist reader comes up with facile remark that this is only arm-chair theorizing constructed in some university, permit me to add that I worked three years part time as a journalist for the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, 1960–1962 and in 1965, producing a number of radio and TV programs. I remember very well the thrill of interviewing the Dalai Lama, Fidel Castro etc., and how much more meaningful interviews with more common people were in understanding what was going on.

**Table 8.1** Peace journalism versus war journalism. *Source* the author

Peace/conflict journalism	War/violence journalism
<p><b>I. Peace/conflict-oriented</b>                      explore conflict <i>formation</i>,                      x parties, y goals, z issues                      general 'win, win' orientation                      open space, open time;                      causes and outcomes anywhere,                      also in history/culture                      making conflicts transparent                      giving voice to all parties;                      empathy, understanding                      see conflict/war as problem,                      focus on conflict creativity                      humanization of all sides;                      more so the worse the weapons  <i>proactive</i>: prevention before                      any violence/war occurs                      focus on invisible effects of violence                      (trauma and glory, damage to structure/culture)</p> <p><b>II. Truth-oriented</b>                      expose untruths on all sides                      uncover all cover-ups</p> <p><b>III. People-Oriented</b>                      focus on suffering all over;                      on women, aged, children,                      giving voice to the voiceless                      give name to all evil-doers                      focus on people peace-makers</p> <p><b>IV. Solution-oriented</b>                      peace = nonviolence + creativity                      highlight peace initiatives,                      also to prevent more war                      focus on structure, culture                      the peaceful society                      aftermath: resolution, re-construction,                      reconciliation</p>	<p><b>I. War/violence-oriented</b>                      focus on conflict <i>arena</i>,                      2 parties, 1 goal (win), war                      general zero-sum orientation                      closed space, closed time;                      causes and exits in arena,                      who threw the first stone                      making wars opaque/secret                      'us-them' journalism,                      propaganda, voice, for 'us'                      see 'them' as the problem,                      focus on who prevails in war                      dehumanization of 'them';                      more so the worse the weapon  <i>reactive</i>: waiting for violence before                      reporting                      focus only on visible effect of violence                      (killed, wounded and material damage)</p> <p><b>II. Propaganda-oriented</b>                      expose 'their' untruths                      help 'our' cover-ups/lies</p> <p><b>III. Elite-Oriented</b>                      focus on 'our' suffering;                      on able-bodied elite males,                      being their mouth-piece                      give name of their evil-doer                      focus on elite peace-makers</p> <p><b>IV. Victory-oriented</b>                      peace = victory + cease-fire                      conceal peace-initiative,                      before victory is at hand                      focus on treaty, institution                      the controlled society                      leaving for another war, return if the                      old flares up</p>

them into that kind of journalism like the Pentagon did in the Gulf war, following the English model from the Falkland/Malvinas war.<sup>4</sup>

We tend to focus on wars between states, but the advice for peace journalism applies also to violence between other groups, to rape and wife battering, mistreatment of children, race and national strife, class conflict, where violence is reported and blame usually fixed on one side.

The war focus in war journalism will polarize and escalate, calling for hatred and more violence to avenge and stop 'them', in line with a neo-fascist theory of war termination: let them fight and kill each other till they get 'ready for the negotiating table'.<sup>5</sup> The broader category is 'peace enforcement', peace by warlike means.

Peace journalism tries to depolarize by showing the black and white of all sides, and to de-escalate by highlighting peace and conflict resolution as much as violence. How successful has to be seen. But changing the discourse within which something is thought, spoken of and acted upon is a very powerful approach.<sup>6</sup>

Peace journalism stands for truth as opposed to propaganda and lies, but is not 'investigative journalism' in the sense of uncovering lies only on 'our' side. Truth holds for all sides, just like exploration of the conflict formation and giving voice (*glasnost*) to all.

Peace journalism is a 'journalism of attachment' to all actual and potential victims; war journalism only attaches to 'our' side. The task is to report truthfully both war and peace, shaming the adage that 'peace must be working, there is nothing in the media'.<sup>7</sup> The task of peace journalism is serious, professional reporting, making these processes more transparent. The task of peace advocacy is better left to peace workers.

Peace Journalism does essentially what journalists do anyhow, keeping in mind a maximum number of items from the left hand column. The eye for the essential,

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<sup>4</sup> This is described very clearly by the leading specialist on war reporting, Philip Knightley, in his *The First Casualty*, New York, London: Harcourt Brace, 1975 ("truth" is his first casualty, although it is of course 'peace'). Also see Mira Behan's excellent *Kriegstrommeln: Medien, Krieg und Politik*, München, DTV, 1996, on the war reporting from Yugoslavia. In that case the role of the public relations agencies (particularly Hill & Knowlton and Ruder Finn) seems to have been so massive, and filters to sort out PR virtual reality from real reality so few, that it is difficult to assess the situation without knowing what the PR firms transmitted.

For an earlier period, *Reporting World War II, American Journalism*, Parts I (1938–1944), II (1944–1946), Library of America, 1995 is an excellent source. War is described as 'organized insanity', as 'madness'; attacks are not 'surgical', civilians are not 'collaterals' (that kind of sanitized Newspeak is the predicament of our generation). Still, the focus is on war, not peace.

<sup>5</sup> Anybody advocating anything like that might ask whether they themselves would be willing to be killed, sacrificed, for the sake of somebody getting to the 'table', some kind of altar. In that case the faith in the 'table' as peace instrument must be as high as the patriotism of yesteryear.

<sup>6</sup> See Johan Galtung and Richard Vincent, *U.S. GLASNOST: Missing Political Themes in U.S. Media Discourse*, Cresskill NJ: Hampton Press (March 1999).

<sup>7</sup> A good example would be many years of disarmament and cooperation in reconstructing the country in Nicaragua, by the Centro de Estudios Sociales (Apartado 1747, Managua, Nicaragua), headed by Alejandro Bendaña and Zoilamé\_Ica Narváez.

the devotion both to facts and to hope, the need to be a good writer, to work quickly and hence to be a good administrator of own time; all of that remains the same.

But new types of knowledge would be needed, such as identifying the conflict formation, the parties, their goals and the issues, and not fall into the trap of believing that the key actors are where the action (violence, war) is. In medicine no physician would make the mistake of seeing a swollen ankle as an ‘ankle disease’, s/he would be on the watch for possible disturbances in the cardio-vascular system and the heart. The problem is not necessarily where it shows up, that holds for the body as well as for the conflict, for a ‘race riot’ and a case of mistreatment of children as well as for inter-nation and inter-state conflicts. To know where to look requires practice, learning from more experienced colleagues, and from the past. What would peace reporting in earlier wars have looked like?

How can the drama of working for peace, the struggle to see the violence and the festering conflict as the problem, and from there to arrive at conflict transformation, be reported in such a way that it becomes exciting news? How is excessive moralism avoided keeping in mind the basic point: reduce human suffering, increase human happiness? Not easy. But not impossible.

An example: reporting on peace proposals. Somebody has come up with a plan: an intergovernmental organization, NGO, government, some other conflict party, an individual. The task of the peace journalist is to identify such initiatives, give them voice, highlight positive points, stimulating dialogue, not signaling any agreement or disagreement, add the plan to the peace culture of the conflict provided it stands for *peace by peaceful means*. But the task is also to ask difficult questions, pointing out possible deficits. Here is a short checklist aiming more at the plan than at the person or group behind it:

- [1] What was the method behind the plan? Dialogue with parties, and in that case with all the parties? Some trial negotiation? Analogy with other conflicts? Intuition?
- [2] To what extent is the plan acceptable to all parties?  
If not, what can be done about it?
- [3] To what extent is the plan, if realized, self-sustainable?  
If not, what can be done about it?
- [4] Is the plan based on autonomous action by the conflict parties, or does it depend on outsiders?
- [5] To what extent is there a *process* in the plan, about who shall do what, how, when and where, or is it only *outcome*?
- [6] To what extent is the plan based on what only elites can do, what only people can do, or on what both can do?
- [7] Does the plan foresee an ongoing conflict resolution or is the idea a single-shot agreement?

- [8] Is peace/conflict transformation education for people, for elites or for both, built into the plan?
- [9] If there has been violence, to what extent does the plan contain elements of reconciliation?
- [10] If there has been violence, to what extent does the plan contain elements of rehabilitation/reconstruction?
- [11] If the plan doesn't work, is the plan reversible?
- [12] Even if the plan does work for this conflict, does it create new conflicts or problems? Is it a good deal?

In other words: do not take peace and conflict work lightly!

Given the urgency the task is much overdue, but better late than never.

*What would a code of peace journalism look like?* A war journalist is basically operating under the rules imposed by his military command. To whom or what does the peace journalist owe his/her allegiance? To 'peace'? Maybe too abstract. To present and future victims of violence/war? Better, but what does that mean? How about keeping secrets? Even if the long term goals, the what and why, are clear and out in the open, the who, how, when and where of a major nonviolent campaign may have to count on a surprise effect.

*How could a monitoring process be initiated?* Peace journalism, like anything else, should be evaluated, including quality (with prizes, of course), quantity (what percentage of the media are carrying material of that kind), and the extent to which this reaches the reader/listener/viewer. The hypothesis that the public is disinterested could be tested and differentiated: who accept (women? young people? middle class?), who reject (men? middle aged? lower/upper class?).

For good peace work empathy, creativity and nonviolence are needed. Exactly the same is required of the peace journalist. And that includes dialogues with war journalists.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Many, reporting war or peace or both, are "Journalists Who Risk Death" *International Herald Tribune*, 5 August 1997, by Anthony Lewis: "In the last 10 years, 173 Latin American reporters, photographers, columnists and editors have been murdered. ... They were just doing their ordinary job: trying to publish the truth". Risk should unite all kinds of journalists." For an excellent introduction for any kind of journalist to the intricacies of conflict, see Richard E. Rubenstein et al., *Frameworks for Interpreting Conflict: A Handbook for Journalists*, Fairfax: Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, 1994. The present author's *Peace By Peaceful Means*, London, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1996, Part II is about conflict analysis and resolution. For the reality of war reporting, see Wilhelm Kempf, *Gulf War Revisited: A Comparative Study of the Gulf War Coverage in American and European Media*, Konstanz: Projektgruppe Friedensforschung, September 1996, and by the same author *Media Coverage of Third Party Initiatives—A Case of Peace Journalism?* Projektgruppe Friedensforschung, Conference on Peace Journalism, Konstanz, 13–15 June 1997. From that same conference, also see the excellent paper by Heikki Luostarnen and Rune Ottosen, *Challenges for Journalism in Restricted Conflicts After the Second World War*, also with a checklist of what to look out for.

## Further Readings

- Galtung J (2000) “The Task of Peace Journalism”, in: *Ethical Perspectives—A Quarterly Review*, 7, 2-3: 162–167.
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- Galtung J; Jake, Lynch (2010) “*Reporting Conflict: New Directions in Peace Journalism*”. (St. Lucia, Queensland, Australia: University of Queensland Press): 225.
- Galtung J (2010) “Peace Journalism: 80 Galtung Editorials on Peace and War”, in: Antonio Carlos da Silva Rosa(Ed): (TRANSCEND University Press Popular ([www.transcend.org/tup](http://www.transcend.org/tup)), Volume 5): 191.