

# Peace Journalism in Theory and Practice

Written by Silvia De Michelis

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SILVIA DE MICHELIS, DEC 23 2018

### Peace Journalism: An Evolving Concept

Peace journalism, as the name suggests, is a form of journalism committed to exploring root causes of conflict in order to “create opportunities for society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict” (Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005: 6). Its history can be tracked back to 1965, when Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge analysed what makes foreign news newsworthy (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). Jake Lynch and Johan Galtung (Lynch and Galtung, 2010) further developed the notion of peace journalism and argued that the media (war reporting, in particular) predominantly exhibit biases towards violence and rest on the conceptual belief that ‘conflict’ equals ‘war’. Within the field of peace journalism (Lynch and Galtung, 2010; Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005), this view was considered problematic because it prevents conflict to be considered as an opportunity for the search of a new harmony between the parties involved, via a process that does not have to necessarily develop into a war. In fact, as Johan Galtung’s theory of nonviolence and conflict resolution (Galtung, 1969) suggests, a conflict is a clash of incompatible interests amongst the parties that can be transcended in order to reach a further and deeper agreement.

In peace journalism studies (Lynch, 2014; Seaga Shaw, Lynch and Hackett, 2011; Keeble, Tulloch and Zollmann, 2010; Lynch & Galtung, 2010; Dente Ross and Tehranian, 2009; Shinar and Kempf, 2007; Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005) war journalism is seen as a profession that predominantly reports violence and detaches conflict from its wider context, both in time (that is, it fails to report all the causes that historically might have led to the conflict formation) and space (its geography, namely it fails to report on all the parties that might be affected by the conflict). In this fashion, conflict is portrayed as a zero-sum game, where the narrative “us” vs. “them” is the predominant frame. This situation nurtures the conviction that victory resides in the predominance of one party over the other, and that peace is merely achievable by the work of institutions and treaties only after the war is over. Furthermore, war journalism relies on the overwhelming use of élites as sources of information (i.e. diplomats, policy makers, military officials, etc.), at the expense of the people that are more directly involved in the conflict. Finally, war journalism is considered close to propaganda because of its inclination to expose the lies of ‘the other’, whilst covering or omitting those of its ‘own’ (i.e. that of a particular coalition).

It is for this last reason that in peace journalism studies the analysis of how power operates is paramount. As intended by Foucault power is “the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society” (1977: 93), which the symbolic production of news nurtures. ‘Strategic situation’ refers to the legitimacy society attributes to the positive or negative meaning that certain social practices (for example, military intervention) retain, which are intensified through the proliferation of images. As a consequence, the information provided by mass media contributes “to inculcate norms into all forms of cultural production, including journalism” (Galtung and Lynch, 2010: 29). Therefore, exposing the interplay of power, and of power relations in conflict scenarios at all levels in society (inter-personal, cultural and structural, as well as globally) is a necessary component within the practice of peace journalism. This is necessary to enable readers to “perceive the tacit inscription of dominant accounts; critique them by cross-referencing with other, perhaps peripheral accounts; bring backgrounds into foreground focus; excavate hidden causes and consequences; and thereby chasten power” (Lynch, 2014: 51).

Galtung and Lynch (Galtung and Lynch, 2010) established four main principles that can serve as main guidance for peace journalism:

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1. Explore the formation of conflicts: who are the parties involved; what are their goals; what is the socio-political and cultural context of the conflict; what are the visible and invisible manifestations of violence;
2. Avoid the de-humanisation of the parties involved and expose their interests;
3. Offer nonviolent responses to conflict and alternatives to militarised/violent solutions;
4. Report nonviolent initiatives that take place at the grassroots level and follow the resolution, reconstruction and reconciliation phases.

This subject is constantly debated, especially in relation to the most frequent critique against peace journalism which considers it as a form of advocacy towards a particular cause: that of peace, in breach of the principle of journalistic objectivity. As a counter-argument to this critique, Christian *et al.*'s theory of the media proves useful to explain why peace journalism is needed and how it can be operationalised. Within the practice of journalism, they inscribe 'the social responsibility tradition', which "retains freedom as the basic principle for organizing public communication, including the media" (Christian, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng and White, 2009: 24), and legitimises the promotion of certain moral givens within the public discourse, such as the protection of air, water and the environment for the future existence of the human race and other living beings. These moral obligations are, in fact, generally accepted within most advanced societies.

Within the field of peace journalism 'peace' – intended as an end – and 'nonviolence' – intended as a means or practice – are considered as both the organizing principles of news-making and the fundamental moral givens all societies should aim towards, nationally and globally, in line with the view expressed by Christian *et al.* (ibid.). It is for this reason that peace journalism can be approached as an evolving profession as well as an analytical model for scholarly research of media representations (or mis-representations). It constitutes a *medium* for exploring the aspects and dynamics of physical, cultural, and structural violence, exploration that is considered vital for the orientation of knowledge and production of actions, which are needed to build more peaceful societies.

Inscribed into news-making are the selectivity and framing of news. In the field of journalism studies "to frame is to select some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993: 51). Therefore, according to peace journalism scholars (Lynch, 2014; Seaga Shaw, Lynch and Hackett, 2011; Keeble, Tulloch and Zollmann, 2010; Lynch & Galtung, 2010; Dente Ross and Tehranian, 2009; Shinar and Kempf, 2007; Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005), nonviolent initiatives need to be reported to foster peaceful solutions of conflict and de-saturate the collective imaginary from the sustained belief that violence and war are the only viable responses to it. Peace scholar John Lederach states in this regard that: "There are people who have a vision for peace, emerging often from their own experience of conflict and pain" which are often unheard "because they do not represent official power ... or because they are written off as biased" (1997: 94).

The traditional conceptualisation of journalism considers the world as a set of ready-made facts, whose building up process and meaning are often ignored, or excessively simplified. Instead, within the field of foreign intervention for example, a critical examination of the dominant interpretation of what journalists observe should be reported in a way that takes into consideration the implementation of nonviolent practices for the solution of conflicts. With regards to war reporting, Paul Mason reports in *The Guardian*:

We are besieged now by images of the dead in conflict, usually published by people who believe it will either deter killing, expose the perpetrators or illustrate war's futility and brutality. It is an old illusion [...]. Many Germans in the 1920s and 30s came to believe, despite the horrific photos, that the war had embodied the noblest and most exhilarating aspects of human life; and that warfare represented the ultimate in technological modernity and moral freedom. This remains a more dangerous myth than the idea that war is harmless, fun or heroic (2014: 5).

## In Practice: The Case of Libya

Since the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Western powers have been entrenched in a series of foreign interventions – Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya to name but a few – that are politically motivated and considered necessary to pursue the democratic aspirations of the most powerful states that hold a permanent status within the UN Security Council. The

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politics of foreign interventionism has been hugely debated with regards to Libya, and even more strongly, Syria. For the purpose of this article, I will limit to espouse why the 2011 intervention in Libya can be regarded as an interesting case to further promote peace journalism as an analytical tool for conflict reporting and for questioning the necessity and effectiveness of military force whilst reporting accurately.

In December 2010, turmoil in Tunisia and Egypt gave rise to the Arab Spring that extended across 2011. These events were regarded by Western powers with mixed feelings of excitement – because of their promise to substitute dictatorship with democracy – and fear – because of their unpredictability (Jenkins, 2015). Moreover, after the fiasco in Rwanda, Iraq and Afghanistan, the international community needed to implement a more refined foreign policy doctrine to regulate cases of gross human rights violations in failed or failing states. To fulfil this, the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ doctrine (ICISS, 2001), usually abbreviated to R2P, was specifically invoked by UN Secretary Ban Ki-Moon (2011) in the context of the civil uprising in Libya. In fact, in the aftermath of the starting of the civil unrest in Libya, UN Security Council approved resolution 1970 (S/RES/1970, 2011) on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2011, condemning the lethal force used by Gaddafi against protesters in Benghazi. This resolution was followed by resolution 1973 (S/RES/1973, 2011), which authorised “all necessary means” to protect civilians only 20 days later. With the latter resolution, the UN Security Council imposed a no-fly zone over Libya led by NATO. The NATO operation was called ‘Odyssey Dawn’ and the result of it was the bombing and killing of thousands of civilians.

The operation in Libya is a very interesting case study for observing the role journalism plays in conflict reporting as well as the role that peace journalism can play in contributing to reinforce a type of narrative that doesn’t promote military actions with humanitarian purposes. In fact, the official document that established the R2P doctrine acknowledges the role that the media play in heightening public awareness over conflicts worldwide. The phrasing of the document specifies, indeed:

The media have a particularly important role in conflict prevention, in particular in alerting policy makers – and the public opinion that influences them – to the catastrophic consequences that so often flow from no action being taken. More immediate and more graphic stories will always tend to take precedence, but there is much more that can and should be done to [...] prod decision makers into appropriate action (ICISS, 2011: 26).

However, the R2P report further states:

Proper conduct of an appropriate public information campaign is not only critical to maintaining public support for an intervention but also to maintaining the cohesion of the coalition (ICISS, 2001: 64).

In so doing, the ICISS report entrusts public information – the media, which should rest on the principle of objectivity and impartiality – with a supportive mandate directed at benefitting the coalition that reflects the UN Security Council composition, a political body acting through military actions and, therefore, a directly involved part of the conflict. It’s in the opinion of who writes that the apparent irreconcilability between the paradigms through which the media should operate – objectivity and impartiality – and the wording of the ICISS designates public information with propagandistic features. Moreover, being military means so predominantly used by the international community in cases of ‘humanitarian intervention’, the narrative produced by the media will necessarily be supportive of the paradigm ‘peace through violent means’. In this configuration, little space is left to the production of narratives at the mainstream level that reinforce a discourse oriented at the search for ‘peace through nonviolent means’.

Public information is instrumental to the cohesion of the coalition. As it can be inferred from the above quotation, the report actually confirms what Hoskins and O’Loughlin advocate, that is: “[M]edia are becoming part of the practices of warfare to the point that the conduct of war cannot be understood unless one carefully accounts for the role of media in it” (2010: 4). Hoskins and O’Loughlin further stress that: “Media enable a perpetual connectivity that appears to be the key modulator of insecurity and security today, amplifying our awareness of distant conflicts or close-to-home threats, yet containing these insecurities in comforting packages. This connectivity is the principal mechanism through which *media is weaponized* (emphasis mine)” (ibid: 2). This semantic and conceptual operation embodies what I would call the “weaponisation of peace”.

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The reaction of the UK, the US, and France to the Libyan uprising was far more radical, harsh, and fast against Gaddafi than against Muhammad Hosni El Sayed Mubarak of Egypt, who stepped down after three weeks from the eruption of the protest, and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who fled the country after a month from the beginning of the revolution in Tunisia. Simon Jenkins, a journalist from *The Guardian*, wrote:

Of all the uprisings, that which most attracted British attention was Libya against Colonel Gaddafi. But he had been Tony Blair's "good friend" and apple in the eye of British oil companies and the London School of Economics. One whose side should Britain sit, that of an "Arab Spring" rebellion or on that of its ally? There was no context. A separatist revolt in Libya [...] offered David Cameron his Blair moment, a chance for a heroic intervention. (2015: 152)

By looking at media reports of that time, what turned useful to facilitate and legitimise the military response against Gaddafi was the daily reports of the violence inflicted on the population only by the dictator, alongside the portrayal of the rebels as a democratic promise in the after-Gaddafi era (See *The Guardian*, 2011; *Daily Telegraph*, 2011; *New York Times*, 2011; *Washington Post*, 2011; *Le Figaro*, 2011; *Liberation*, 2011; *Transcend Media Service*, 2011). On 3 August 2011, two months before Gaddafi was killed, Jenkins wrote about NATO's intervention:

Britain's half-war against Libya is careering onward from reckless gesture to full-scale fiasco. As it reaches six months' duration, every sensibly pessimistic forecast had tuned out true and every jingoistic boat false (2015: 155).

On a contrary note, on 23 August 2011, UK Prime Minister David Cameron declared:

I said at that time that this action was necessary, legal and right – and I still believe that today. It was necessary because Gaddafi was going to slaughter his own people – and that massacre of thousands of innocent people was averted. Legal, because we secured a resolution from the United Nations, and have always acted according to that resolution. And right, because the Libyan people deserve to shape their own future (Stratton, 2011).

Cameron's declaration is conflicting with what was widely reported towards the end of the intervention (see *The Guardian*, 2011; *New York Times*, 2011), when the media acknowledged that the Libyan rebels were a disunited and violent force that indiscriminately targeted mostly black Africans with torture and killing. Also, by this time, there had been many accusations (Hehir, 2018; 2012; Heinze and Steele, 2013; Chomsky, 2011; O'Connell, 2011) that NATO not only surpassed the limits set by the UN Resolution 1973, causing deep divisions amongst the permanent members of the UN Security Council, but that the invocation of the R2P had been very selective. Finally, the media's depiction of Libyans as 'objects' to be saved; the underreporting of the African Union's voice; and the demonization of the peace negotiations led by the Venezuelan leader, Hugo Chávez, were dominant narratives in Western mainstream news (*Transcend Media Service*, 2011; *IPS News*, 2011).

Prior to Cameron's declarations, Paul Scott (2011) published on *Transcend Media Service* – a peace journalism platform:

*Who owns Odyssey Dawn?* If not the Libyan people that will be a disaster. Here at the end of March 2011 with democratic revolutions rocking North Africa and the Middle East, Operation Odyssey Dawn raises a host of questions. The most troubling aspect is that African and Middle Eastern states are viewed by policymakers as objects rather than subjects of international law. [...] [T]opical discussions on, for example, peacekeeping, peace enforcement, humanitarian intervention, and other peacemaking developments in Africa are either uninformed or inadequately analysed. More often than not, they do so with a voice reminiscent of the British Colonial Office in the eighteenth century – paternalistic and unaware.

Immediately after the start of Odyssey Dawn, Jonathan Freedland (2011) reported in *The Guardian*:

Iraq poisoned the notion of "liberal interventionism" [...] Most have not turned sour on the principle that underpinned that ideal: that in a global, interdependent world we have a "responsibility to protect" each other. It is how that principle has been, and can be, implemented in practice [...] In the case of Libya, the principle stands as clear as it ever did. [...] Above all, they need to think of nonviolent forms of intervention that might follow the immediate work of

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massacre prevention. Former foreign secretary David Miliband suggests this in Libya's case: a combination of arms embargoes, cuts in the supply of African mercenaries, logistical help for the opposition and the emergence of a democratic Egypt, acting as a model to the region – taken together it would amount to a “big squeeze” to push Gaddafi out. It won't happen immediately [...]. But, as Miliband says, “stalemate is better than slaughter”.

Miliband's proposal was rejected on the base of political rivalry, and the effectiveness of what he proposed could certainly be debated. However, Freedland's article (ibid.) reminds of the interventions previous to Libya and calls for the need to establish the applicability of a new expertise to interventionism: i.e. nonviolence. In fact, as he concludes: “These are questions which those who advocate this intervention, and interventionism in general, need to answer. Otherwise, too many will conclude their idea is admirable in theory – but dangerous in practice” (ibid.).

## Conclusion

As the scholarship on peace journalism and the reports from acclaimed journalists briefly exposed here demonstrate, a shift in practice would be very much needed. Peace journalism is an interesting tool for exploring the relationship between communication, media corporations, and war. For this reason, I believe it is vital that both practitioners and academics conduct a critical examination of what the role of media in conflict is and *should be*. This would help direct the global collective imaginary to consider conflict as an opportunity for progress and mutual cooperation rather than an occasion for mutual destruction. Furthermore, deeper studies of how nonviolence can be applied to conflict will enable non-military solutions to be more thoroughly applied to conflict scenarios.

A nonviolent approach to conflict might be harder, but nonetheless more efficient for the preservation of the human race if we consider that the current advancement on military technology would cause a higher and indiscriminate destructiveness. In my opinion, peace journalism is a valid attempt for stripping war journalism of its predominant focus on violence and from its deeply embedded bias that considers militarism as the most effective remedy to conflict. It can be said that the main challenge peace journalism responds to is attributing to nonviolence the legitimisation and authority it deserves.

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