

What is Peace Journalism?

BY ANNABEL MCGOLDRICK AND JAKE LYNCH

CONFLICT AND PEACE FORUM

Professor Johan Galtung, Peace Studies professor and director of the TRANSCEND network, started using the term, 'Peace Journalism' in the 1970s. Conflict and Peace Forums, a think-tank based near Maidenhead, UK, developed Galtung's original ideas in a series of international conferences at Taplow Court from 1997–99, and in publications: The Peace Journalism Option (1998); What Are Journalists For? (1999), and, Using Conflict Analysis in Reporting (2000).

After the deadliest and most violent century in human history, the world is all too well schooled in the language of war and hatred.

Peace Journalism can help teach another language, a language rooted in non-violence and creativity in thinking about conflicts.

There is a pervasive belief, especially in English-speaking countries in the West, that journalists “just report the facts.”

The problem with this belief has become steadily more obvious in a media-savvy world: many people know how to create and tailor facts for journalists to report. Indeed, most governments think of their actions and statements as part of a “media strategy” which cannot be separated from the business of running their country’s affairs.

What this means is that the facts do not crop up innocently, waiting for journalists to discover and report them. The reporting, and a calculation about its effects – on public opinion, for instance – is usually already built into the facts. And governments rely on this reporting to help bolster their own images and attack their opponents.

But, how does a government know what facts to create, or how to present these facts so that reporting is done the way that those players would like? Only from their experience of reading, watching and listening to stories in the past. This means that every time a journalist reports on an issue, that story adds another layer to the collective understanding of how journalists are likely to respond in similar situations.

In this way journalists influence the kind of facts likely to be provided for them to report in the future – the future behaviour of, say, parties

to a conflict. Journalists, their sources and their audiences are counterparts in a feedback loop of cause and effect.

So the claim that journalists “just report the facts” gives an incomplete, and in some cases, inaccurate account of the journalist’s role. All journalism is an intervention between the story originator – in this case the government – and the audience – the public. And journalists make choices about the ethics of each intervention.

Peace Journalism seeks to minimize the rift between opposed parties by not repeating “facts” that demonize or set the stage for conflict. Therefore, the basic question a Peace Journalist would ask before crafting any story would be “what can I do with my intervention to enhance the prospects for peace?”

In a phrase, Peace Journalism is a broader, fairer and more accurate way of framing stories, drawing on the insights of conflict analysis and transformation. The Peace Journalism approach provides a new road map for tracing the connections between journalists, their sources, the stories they cover and the consequences of their reporting – the ethics of journalistic intervention. It opens up a literacy of non-violence and creativity as applied to the practical job of everyday reporting.

It follows that Peace Journalism holds the greatest appeal for journalists working in



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situations where it is impossible to avoid thinking about their responsibility for the consequences of their reporting. Much pioneering work was done by the Media Peace Centre in Cape Town, South Africa, through the transition from Apartheid.

Journalists in Indonesia have collaborated with the present authors in training dialogues about Peace Journalism and in a recent field trip to Poso, in Central Sulawesi (see photo). The area has been riven by conflict and periodic outbreaks of violence for the last two years of Indonesia's shaky transition from the New Order of President Suharto. Participants produced Peace Journalism treatments for eight national publications as well as TV and radio.

This work, the work of Professor Johan Galtung, along with training dialogues and conferences in many countries over the past few years, form the basis for the first practical Peace Journalism Manual, from which the following list of "Dos and Don'ts" is taken:

What a Peace Journalist would strive to do

1. **AVOID** portraying a conflict as consisting of only two parties contesting one goal. The logical outcome is for one to win and the other to lose.
INSTEAD a Peace Journalist would disaggregate the two parties into many smaller groups, pursuing many goals, opening up more creative potential for a range of outcomes.
2. **AVOID** accepting stark distinctions between self and other. These can be used to build the sense that another party is a threat or "beyond the pale" of civilised behaviour: both key justifications for violence.
INSTEAD seek the "other" in the "self" and vice versa. If a party is presenting itself as "the goodies", ask questions about how different its behaviour really is to that it ascribes to "the baddies" – isn't it ashamed of itself?

3. **AVOID** treating a conflict as if it is only going on in the place and at the time that violence is occurring.
INSTEAD try to trace the links and consequences for people in other places now and in the future. Ask:
 - Who are all the people with a stake in the outcome?
 - What will happen if...?
 - What lessons will people draw from watching these events unfold as part of a global audience?
 - How will they enter the calculations of parties to future conflicts near and far?
4. **AVOID** assessing the merits of a violent action or policy of violence in terms of its visible effects only.
INSTEAD try to find ways of reporting on the invisible effects. For example, the long-term consequences of psychological damage and trauma, perhaps increasing the likelihood that those affected will be violent in future, either against other people or, as a group, against other groups or other countries.
5. **AVOID** letting parties define themselves by simply quoting their leaders' restatement of familiar demands or positions.
INSTEAD enquire deeper into goals:
 - How are people on the ground affected by the conflict in everyday life?
 - What do they want changed?
 - Is the position stated by their leaders the only way or the best way to achieve the changes they want?

This may help to empower parties to articulate their goals and make creative outcomes more likely.
6. **AVOID** concentrating always on what divides the parties and the differences between what they say they want.
INSTEAD try asking questions which may reveal areas of common ground. Lead your report with answers which suggest some goals maybe shared or at least compatible.
7. **AVOID** only reporting the violent acts and describing "the horror." If you exclude everything else, you suggest that the only explanation for violence is previous violence (revenge); the only remedy, more violence (coercion/punishment).
INSTEAD show how people have been blocked and frustrated or deprived in everyday life as a way of explaining the violence.
8. **AVOID** blaming someone for "starting it."
INSTEAD try looking at how shared problems and issues are leading to consequences which all the parties say they never intended.
9. **AVOID** focusing exclusively on the suffering, fears and grievances of only one party. This divides the parties into villains and victims and suggests that coercing or punishing the villains represents a solution.
INSTEAD treat as equally newsworthy the suffering, fears and grievance of all sides.
10. **AVOID** victimizing language like destitute, devastated, defenceless, pathetic and tragedy which only tells us what has been done to and could be done for a group of people. This disempowers them and limits the options for change.
INSTEAD report on what has been done and could be done by the people. Don't just ask them how they feel, also ask them how they are coping and what they think. Can they suggest any solutions?
11. **AVOID** imprecise use of emotive words to describe what has happened to people.
 - "Genocide" means the wiping-out of an entire people.
 - "Decimated" (of a population) means reducing it by a tenth of its former size.
 - "Tragedy" is a form of drama, originally Greek, in which someone's fault or weakness proves his or her undoing.
 - "Assassination" is the murder of a head of state.

- “Massacre” is the deliberate killing of people known to be unarmed and defenceless. (Are we sure? Or might these people have died in battle?)
- “Systematic” (for example, raping, or forcing people from their homes) means the actions have been organised in a deliberate pattern. (Is this the actual case or have there been a number of unrelated, albeit extremely nasty incidents?)

INSTEAD always be precise about what we know. Do not minimise suffering but reserve the strongest language for the gravest situations or you will beggar the language and help to justify disproportionate responses which escalate the violence.

12. **AVOID** demonising *adjectives* like vicious, cruel, brutal and barbaric. These always describe one party’s view of what another party has done. To use them puts the journalist on that side and helps to justify an escalation of violence.

INSTEAD report what you know about the wrongdoing and give as much information as you can about the reliability of other people’s reports or descriptions of it.

13. **AVOID** demonising *labels* like terrorist, extremist, fanatic or fundamentalist. These are always given by us to them. No one ever uses them to describe himself or herself and so for a journalist to use them is always to take sides. They mean the person is unreasonable, therefore it seems to make less sense to reason (negotiate) with them.

INSTEAD try calling people by the names they give themselves. Or be more precise in your descriptions.

14. **AVOID** focusing exclusively on the human rights abuses, misdemeanours and wrongdoings of only one side.

INSTEAD try to name ALL wrongdoers and treat as equally serious the allegations made

by all sides in a conflict. Treating seriously does not mean taking at face value, but instead making equal efforts to establish whether any evidence exists to back them up, treating the victims with equal respect and the chances of finding and punishing the wrongdoers as being of equal importance.


15. **AVOID** making an opinion or claim seem like an established fact. (“Eurico Guterres, said to be responsible for a massacre in East Timor...”)

INSTEAD tell your readers or your audience who said what. (“Eurico Guterres, accused by a top UN official of ordering a massacre in East Timor...”) That way you avoid signing yourself and your news service up to the allegations made by one party in the conflict against another.

16. **AVOID** greeting the signing of documents by leaders, which bring about military victory or ceasefire, as necessarily creating peace.

INSTEAD try to report on the issues which remain and which may still lead people to commit further acts of violence in the future. Ask, What is being done to strengthen means on the ground to handle and resolve conflict non-violently, to address development or structural needs in the society and to create a culture of peace?

17. **AVOID** waiting for leaders on “our” side to suggest or offer solutions.

INSTEAD pick up and explore peace initiatives wherever they come from. Ask questions to ministers, for example, about ideas put forward by grassroots organisations. Assess peace perspectives against what you know about the issues that the parties are really trying to address. Do not ignore proposed solutions because they do not coincide with established positions. 

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