Peace journalism: Theoretical and methodological developments

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Peace journalism (PJ) has come a long way in the decade or so since the book of the same name that Annabel McGoldrick and I published in 2005, which gathered together insights from our experiences as reporters in UK television and radio and as trainers and facilitators of workshops for professional journalists in several countries – along with a broad overview of relevant theoretical perspectives on both peace and journalism.

In it, we put forward a definition that has been quoted in most subsequent published work in the field:

Peace Journalism is when editors and reporters make choices – of what to report and how to report it – that create opportunities for society at large to consider and value nonviolent responses to conflict. (Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005: 5)

This formula is deliberately non-specific on various salient issues. It contains no commitment to the type of conflict being reported, for example. A significant cross-section of research in PJ has concerned itself with the business of war reporting – that is, how journalists respond to the ‘hot phase’ of a violent conflict (such as the articles collected in Ross and Tehranian, 2008). Both Blasi (2009) and Mogekwu (2011) argue that this phase of ‘manifest’ conflict offers, if anything, a less propitious milieu for the exertion of journalistic agency implied in the definition, than the previous phase where conflict is ‘latent’ (p. 244), with attitudes and behaviours confined largely to symbolic domains.

By emphasizing that it is for ‘society at large’ – or, in other iterations, ‘readers and audiences’ – to consider the value of non-violent responses, it situates PJ firmly in the realm of professional journalism, committed to factual reporting. It is for the journalism to provide the opportunities for such considering and valuing: if such responses – once considered – are rejected, ‘there is nothing else journalism can do about it, while remaining

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Other writers, such as Keeble (2010), Hackett (2011) and Goggin (2013), have considered the implications for PJ of an extending mediascape in which professional journalism takes its place as merely one influential form of symbolic production, among with multitudinous others afforded by social and other digital media. However, few writers have followed Keeble’s (2010) recommendation that PJ scholarship and advocacy concentrate, instead, on ‘the tradition of radical journalism committed to progressive social change’ (p. 50).

It is, then, as a reform project concentrating mainly on deficit analysis of professional journalism in mainstream media, and attempting to mobilize what Hackett (2011) calls ‘immanent critique’ (p. 59) among and around journalistic and scholarly communities, that PJ has become a globally distributed movement for change. Predominant among the forms it takes is journalist education, either in formal settings such as university courses or in continuing professional development as a form of donor aid. The Peace Journalist, a biannual magazine produced at the Global Peace Journalism Center of Park University, Missouri, chronicles a broad sweep of activities in this category, with the current edition (at the time of writing) featuring initiatives in countries including Turkey, Afghanistan, New Zealand, Greece, Pakistan, Kenya, Jordan, Comoros Islands, Israel and Nigeria.

To date, however, as journalist educators Stig-Arne Nohrstedt and Rune Ottosen argue in their contribution to this special edition, featuring theoretical and methodological developments in PJ, a programme of ‘co-ordinated and organised reforms’ has not yet arisen from the PJ movement. The projects are ‘scattered geographically and do not have a global scope’. There is, indeed, a contradiction inherent in PJ which throws into sharp relief the need for a higher level of organizational resources to be brought to bear on it. The germ of the idea, first proposed by Johan Galtung, came in response to his influential essay, published in 1965 with Mari Holmboe Ruge, The Structure of Foreign News. In the development of scholarship on journalism, this contribution catalysed and hastened an emerging consensus that downplayed the influence of individual journalists on the content of news – captured in the image of the ‘gatekeeper’ (Manning White, 1950) – in favour of identifying generative force in the structures, both organizational and ideological, in which journalism is produced. And, yet, it is the individual agency of editors and reporters that is appealed to in the journalism education and training that has been the mechanism in chief for spreading PJ as a professional practice.

There is, Nohrstedt and Ottosen say, a need for ‘a joint approach together with universities, colleges, training institutes, NGOs such as Reporters Sans Frontieres and the International Federation of Journalists, and the European Council and the UN, in particular Unesco with the suggestion of safety indicators for journalists’. Such an approach, systematizing and coordinating PJ contributions to journalism education and training, would begin to build the structural resources to match what has proved an attractive set of ideas and principles, whenever they have been able to gain a hearing. Such agencies, Nohrstedt and Ottosen aver, would be ‘trustworthy partners in a joint effort to make a difference when it comes to establishing journalism as an important contributor to international norm-setting and to raise the profession’s ethical standards with regard to violent conflicts’.

Then, the better to convince potential partners of the value of promoting more PJ, they argue for its existing theoretical frameworks, drawn mainly from peace research, to be
supplemented with approaches attentive to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The case for PJ must include being able to show the extent to which readers and audiences are indeed prompted and enabled to consider and value non-violent responses and, therefore, what difference its instantiation and spread within conflict-affected symbolic environments could make. CDA would enable researchers to identify ideational distinctions, beyond the level of manifest content, in the representation of conflicts and match them to those in the PJ model – an approach applied, since these authors first suggested it (Nohrstedt and Ottosen, 2011), to a four-country study of differential audience responses to War Journalism and Peace Journalism versions of television news (in Lynch, 2014). Nohrstedt and Ottosen show how adding CDA to the PJ analytical approach discloses layers of meaning and salience in the reporting, in Norwegian and Swedish media, of defence matters, including relations between the two countries and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the underpinning strategic assumptions.

Saumava Mitra’s contribution to this special edition traces more of the conceptual ‘connecting tissue’ between Communication and Peace, in providing a summarizing overview of contributions to an important recent book, an edited collection of that name (Hoffmann and Hawkins, 2015). In her article, Mitra points out the shared interpretative repertoires of the contributions to build a broader case for commonalities within the diverse field of communication-related disciplines and practices which share the overarching goal of contributing to the building or making of peace. She offers a further theoretical perspective, one capable of enabling categorization in this emerging field, by differentiating communication disciplines according to the narrative relationship to reality of the cultural texts they deal with: thus going beyond what she calls the ‘exercise in cacophony’ that such collections can sometimes seem. So, as an opening gambit, she proposes dividing the approaches into three broad streams:

- Reporting and representing peace;
- Intervening for peace;
- Enacting and communicating peace.

These can be recognized, Mitra argues, as placing exponents at different points along a continuum according to their distance from the underlying propositions of factual reporting – the claim that symbolic production somehow corresponds with a pre-existing reality, rather than merely being positioned as ‘co-terminous’ with surrounding realities. The schema is reminiscent of the continuum of types of media intervention in conflict, put forward much earlier in a pamphlet by the Canadian Institute for Media, Peace and Civic Society (IMPACS), which proposed divisions of basic journalism training, conflict-sensitization for journalists, up to what it called ‘intended-outcome programming’ (Howard, 2002). In Mitra’s hands, this suggestive idea acquires theoretical backing and validation.

As mentioned earlier, professional journalism today rubs up against, and to some extent overlaps with, a multitude of other mediated forms of non-fictional communication, in public spheres that are now more obviously layered and fragmented. This has changed the conduct of journalism, which is seen to be sharing and negotiating its content with exponents in adjacent fields to an extent varying according to different contexts.
of time, place and story. To the extent that the ‘tuning factors’ identified by Galtung and Ruge (1965) were phenomena of the institutional forms of news in an age – the mid-20th century – now increasingly remote from contemporary experience, their influence on the representation of conflicts could perhaps be expected to be on the wane. This could, in turn, create what have been called ‘democratic affordances’ (Goggin, 2013), including greater space and opportunity for more peace journalism – but at what cost?

Nathan Farrell and Stuart Allan, in their contribution to this special edition, explore the vexed questions of reliability and trust arising from a situation in which material salient to stories about conflict has become more likely to reach news publics without passing through the filters of trained observation and copy editing – or, perhaps, ideological censorship – associated with mainstream media production methods. One organization alive to the potentialities of this situation for peace and human rights is the international non-profit, WITNESS, and Farrell and Allan assess its work, which includes equipping citizens in conflict zones with video cameras and the training to use them, as a contribution based on a strong ethical commitment. Its pioneering role in enabling alternative, citizen-centred approaches to reportage casts new light on some of the strategic priorities of the PJ movement, they argue. It certainly helps to ‘de-throne’ official sources whose primacy has been critiqued as an underpinning of the war journalism (WJ) ascendancy in mainstream news, but it seems to lead towards forms of representation in which the advocacy of a particular point of view is more prominently displayed.

‘Other stations show you what happens when the missiles are launched. We show you what happens when they land’. The slogan is from advertising for the satellite TV station, Al Jazeera (AJ) English, during the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. On the PJ aggregation website created by Kimberlye Kowalczyk, who graduated from an online training course I ran in the mid-2000s, many of the links are to the long-form television journalism produced by the channel, with high production values, in such strands as *Witness*. In them, notably, non-elite sources enjoy more space than on other channels to offer their own analysis as well as their own experience. A personal recollection is of attending an informal job interview, with a former colleague who was now highly placed in AJ’s London bureau and preparing to launch the new English language service. For a journalism enterprise to be wholly owned and funded by a government (of Qatar) was, in principle, a potential problem, he agreed, ‘but not a practical one, because Qatar is never in the news’.

If that claim could be made then, in the early part of the current century, it can scarcely be made now. Qatar is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the six-member bloc of Gulf Arab states which are closely aligned with Washington and host US military assets in the region. Zainab Abdul-Nabi’s article in this special edition uses the PJ model as a source of evaluative criteria to assess AJ’s coverage of two episodes of conflict in which the GCC has been directly implicated: Bahrain’s uprising during the first week of the military Saudi intervention and the Syria conflict in the week that followed the Al-Ghouta Chemical Weapons attack in Damascus. Intriguingly, she finds the channel’s Arabic language service more likely, in general, to reproduce GCC framings for these events than its English language counterpart. AJ seems to have evolved into a closer relationship with officialdom in its own country and region, where the Arabic language service is most viewed, whereas, in the wider English-speaking world, it may be retaining and building on at least some of its PJ credentials – or at least its power distance vis-à-vis dominant views of conflict in the countries in which it is produced.
Leticia Anderson offers an innovative analytical treatment of a comparatively ‘cold’ conflict: the symbolic construction, in Australian media, of Muslims and Islam. She compares coverage by selected newspapers from two key political moments: the month leading up to the Federal elections of 2004 and 2007, respectively. The former returned the coalition government of John Howard to a fourth term in office, whereas the latter signalled a breach by installing a Labor ministry under the party’s leader, Kevin Rudd. In a symbol of the supposed political rupture this brought about, Howard himself was defenestrated not only from Kirribilli House, the Prime Minister’s official residence on Sydney’s Lower North Shore, but also in his own nearby electorate – thus losing his parliamentary seat as well as his government.

Anderson operationalizes the definition of Islamophobia set out in an influential report by London’s Runnymede Trust (Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, 1997), which sought to clarify how Islam is often presented as a monolithic and threatening political force rather than a nuanced and diverse religion. Howard had attained notoriety for seeming to foment and exploit voter fears of outsiders – both geographical and cultural – for gain at the ballot box (Marr and Wilkinson, 2003). In the two election campaigns, Anderson considers, Howard’s Liberal Party distributed fake leaflets in marginal electorates, apparently from the Opposition Labor candidate in each case and seeming to presage favourable treatment for Muslims, calculating that this would alienate non-Muslim voters. The difference was that, in the latter campaign, they got caught, in a blaze of publicity that ignited before polling day – one of a succession of stories in which the political manipulation of such issues had been brought to light by journalists.

At the same time, Opposition politicians were becoming more emboldened to challenge some of the Howard-era certitudes, at least rhetorically, supporting the view of discourse underpinning CDA, as being ‘socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned’ (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258). Equipped with evaluative criteria derived from the Runnymede Trust report, Anderson finds the coverage offered to Australian readers in the second period under examination, from 2007, significantly less Islamophobic than in the first, being both conditioned by and contributing to a less divisive and demonizing political atmosphere. In supplementing PJ with an analytical framework designed to draw out highly coded issues of cultural violence, as against merely in the coverage of direct violence as in much previous research, Anderson’s article represents a significant methodological innovation.

Finally in this special edition, Annabel McGoldrick, James Heathers and I present and discuss the results of an experiment in which different groups of participants watched WJ and PJ versions of two familiar stories from television news: on Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers, and the US-sponsored ‘peace talks’ between Israel and the Palestinians, respectively. The results discussed in this article are from Phase 2 of the experiment. In Phase 1, these stories had already prompted strong interactions from respondents who reported their own emotional state in questionnaires and provided two narrative artefacts: in the form of thought-listing protocols and focus group discussions (Lynch, 2014). Viewers of the PJ versions evinced more hope and optimism and proved more likely to diagnose problems in structural terms and to consider and value non-violent, cooperative responses.

The article in this special edition is based on a separate test in which participants were measured for blood volume pulse as they watched the two items. This measure indicates
heart rate variability, which in turn indicates vagal tone, which has been called ‘an autonomic correlate of emotion’ (Porges et al., 1994: 167). This is an important methodological innovation since its addition to the experiment overcomes possible objections to the earlier methods as excessively filtered, through cultural assumptions and potential demand characteristics. In the experiment, vagal tone decreased from baseline through both WJ stories, but showed a slightly smaller decrease during the PJ asylum story, then a significant increase during the PJ Israel–Palestine story. These readings correlated with questionnaire results showing greater hope and empathy among PJ viewers, and increased anger and distress among WJ viewers, of the Israel–Palestine story.

Taken together, then, the articles collected in this special edition constitute a significant new wave in the theoretical and methodological development of PJ. The contributions of Zainab Abdul-Nabi and Leticia Anderson offer fresh perspectives in what has been the dominant strand of published research in the field, namely drawing on the distinctions in the PJ model to derive evaluative criteria for analysing the manifest content of selected media coverage of conflicts – of various kinds. As Stig-Arne Nohrstedt and Rune Ottosen point out, whether and to what extent PJ is likely to make any difference to the symbolic context in which actors (sources) and audiences respond to conflict depends also on accessing deeper layers of implicit content. Their proposal of CDA as a supplement to PJ itself is already ‘up and running’ within the field and will acquire further resonance in response to the use to which they put it, to interrogate and expose tacit strategic judgements inscribed in military manoeuvres.

Annabel McGoldrick, James Heathers and I conclude, on the basis of our experiment putting forward another way to gauge the implicit content of news – the emotional as well as the cognitive experience of viewers as they construct meanings in response – that differentials in the PJ model are indeed highly ideational, in two familiar stories from the news agenda. What to do with that insight? As Nathan Farrell and Stuart Allan suggest, media content is now being generated and disseminated faster and more widely than ever before, and a substantial segment of it aims to prompt and enable a series of audience reactions through states such as outrage, empathy and hope for change. Does it therefore belong to the other side of a ‘firewall’ from professional journalism with its remit of factual reporting and its pretensions to neutrality? Not necessarily, according to Saumava Mitra – perhaps both of these important discursive endeavours should be placed at different points along a continuum of symbolic interventions in conflict and encouraged to engage in productive dialogue. And that could, indeed, expand the opportunities for PJ.

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**Note**

**References**


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