

It should be fair to criticize even noble ideas – Counterplea by Thomas Hanitzsch

There was this chat that I had in my office just a few days ago. We talked about things we write or would like to write about. When I mentioned that I had published some two or three papers critical of peace journalism, one of my colleagues, quite astonished, spontaneously said: "How could you dare to criticize such a good thing?" – It was this very moment when I realized that criticizing a noble idea may sometimes turn out to be not very pleasant.

When Wilhelm Kempf invited me to participate in this special issue of *communication & conflict online*, I looked forward to an interesting and stimulating debate. I always thought of critique and critical scrutiny as something good and useful because it helps to improve theory and practice. This is particularly relevant in the context of this debate, as the impetus of peace journalism is clearly a critical one.

However, if a progressive movement starts to treat its critics unfairly and disrespectfully, then it runs the danger of turning into a self-contained and totalitarian ideology. The language of Samuel Peleg's (2007, 2f) rejoinder is quite revealing to this fact: He sees critics that are "united in their disrespect" for peace journalism attempting to "disqualify" it by "misfiring allegations", which he, in turn, perceives as an "attack" and "assault" on the very essence of peace journalism.

After all, I think it should be legitimate to criticize even a noble idea without moving on the path of the dark side of the Force or being seen as the Darth Vader of the peace journalism universe. In the introduction to his response paper, however, Peleg (2007, 2) laments that peace journalism has taken a lot of "heat" from researchers and practitioners, then he goes on with unfounded accusations such as the one that suggests that I "disrespect" peace journalism and "don't spare any description to disparage it."

This is, of course, absurd. I have never said or done anything that comes even close to this. As a citizen, I actually like peace journalism very much, but as a journalist and communication scholar, I believe it does not work in its presented form, at least under the circumstances of modern news production. In this short paper I will, therefore, briefly respond to Jake Lynch and Samuel Peleg; and I shall focus my response on their contributions to this special issue.

Jake Lynch: Discontent with discontents

Jake Lynch is an experienced and distinguished reporter who has thoughtfully analyzed the role of journalists in covering conflict and war. He is a good writer and a critical mind; and he very deliberately makes his case for the need of peace journalism. The epistemological approach he favors, critical realism and its notion of stratified reality, is certainly one way to go in conflict reporting and, thus, makes perfectly sense to me. In its most elaborated form, critical realism, according to Bhaskar (1997), assumes three domains of reality: the domain of the real, domain of the actual and domain of the empirical. In the production of news, events fall in the domain of the actual and perceived events in the domain of the empirical (Lau 2004). Yet interestingly, this strand in epistemology holds that critical realism is the *natural* way of knowing, which means that journalists can hardly escape from it. If that is true, then critical realism applies to any kind of reporting, which makes it far less peculiar to the reporting of peace and war.

Standpoint epistemology, the approach that I suggested, and critical realism are not mutually exclusive. In Bhaskar's philosophical approach, standpoint epistemology would fit in domain of the empirical. This would have substantial implications for peace journalists: Any perception of reality would then rest on the values of peace and peaceful conflict resolution – as opposed to an emphasis on conflict and war in traditional mainstream journalism. Standpoint epistemology, therefore, takes into account the normative impetus of peace journalism as outlined by Lynch (2007, 2) who argues that "some forms of representation should be preferred to others."

In a subsequent section of his paper, Lynch discusses the tenets and basic values of peace journalism with reference to his distinction between war journalism and peace journalism. In his adaptation of Galtung's work, he sees war journalism as orientated toward violence, war, propaganda, elites and victories, while peace journalism emphasizes peace, conflict, truth, the people and solutions. However, such a distinction, useful as it may seem in theory, is far too simplistic to capture the complex picture of journalistic news production. Furthermore, the expectation that any coverage of conflicts should identify its "history, recent causes and internal composition – the different parties, the nature of their involvement, their perspectives, positions and motivations, and the different relationships between them in terms of power, allegiance and interest" (Francis, quoted in Lynch, 2007, 8) is so obviously taken out of the context of news making. The downsizing of editorial staff and cutback of resources allocated to reporting has become quite pervasive in corporate journalism. Additionally, in many western countries, most notably the United States, growing clientelism and commercialization accounts for much of the shrinking autonomy of journalists.

Only a few privileged journalists would ever have the chance to keep up with the demands of conflict researchers; and Jake Lynch was clearly one of them. BBC reporters are, by and large and compared to their colleagues in other news organizations, quite fortunately equipped with editorial resources, including personnel, time and equipment. This is clearly one of the reasons why the BBC continues to be the flagship of good journalism. In stark contrast to this, most reporters on this planet simply don't have the time, equipment and autonomy to do what Galtung and peace researchers expect them to do.

Still discussing insights from peace research and conflict analysis, Lynch (2007, 9) then criticizes me for my "lack of critical engagement with issues in conflict and peace." He finds it "odd" to quote the Heidelberg Institute, one of the most reputable institutions in the field of conflict research. What was meant as a brief and illustrative snapshot of a world of conflict and war became, in Lynch's response paper, elevated to an "unjustified" and insufficient conflict analysis. It is safe to say that such criticism is rather unfair.

In a similar vein, Lynch's (2007, 10) discomfort with my "idiosyncratic definition of culture" implicit (sic!) in my writing is also a rather pretextual charge. In my initial article, I did not intend to suggest any particular definition of culture here, although journalistic cultures actually constitute the focus of my research (e.g. Hanitzsch 2006, 2007). I simply think that this debate is certainly not the place to struggle over definitions of culture, which is one of the most contested areas in the social sciences and humanities. Given the ever growing number of definitions, the British sociologist Margaret Archer (1996, 2) once noticed that "[w]hat culture is and what culture does are issues bogged down in a conceptual morass from which no adequate sociology of culture has been able to emerge." While Lynch's own understanding of culture – one that relates to power, struggle and contestation – generally makes sense, it is certainly not *per se* superior to other views.

Samuel Peleg: The peace activist

Samuel Peleg is not only a professor for political communications and political violence but also a long time peace activist. After his military service as a tank commander in the Israeli Army, he became a driving force in the peace movement, most notably in *Peace Now* and *One Voice*. In his response to my initial article, it is rather the peace activist that speaks out, and not the scholar. I wouldn't have any problem with this, if Peleg's rejoinder had cited me correctly.

In his response paper, Peleg (2007, 2) suggests that I allegedly argued that peace journalism is "incompatible with the true nature of journalism". The truth is, I have never written anything like this. I am not sure what the "true nature" of journalism is; and it would be odd to use such an essentialist concept in the analysis of human-made news production. What I actually proposed was an analytical distinction between journalism and other modes of public communication, including public relations, advertising and entertainment. Within the subfield of journalism, one can still find a notable diversity in professional ideologies and practices, from the objective just-the-facts reporting to advocacy journalism.

Peleg (2007, 3) obviously misinterpreted this approach by claiming: "His logic is that peace journalism is public relations and not real journalism because 'it advocates and promotes a certain way of action'." This is clearly a misleading interpretation of what I actually wrote. My contention was that public relations is different from journalism because its communication goals usually originate from the outside, whereas in journalism, communication goals are defined by the journalists themselves and their news organizations. In my view, journalists can clearly have and promote a personal agenda, which becomes manifest most notably in commentary and advocacy journalism. I have not suggested that it would be "dishonorable" to take sides against genocide and ethnic cleansing or that it would be "amateurish" to passionately promote aware-

ness against massive raping and barbarism. But we are in trouble when it is the journalist who identifies the victim and the perpetrator, good and evil, and when it is the journalist who decides if a "genocide" – a massively misused concept – is taking place.

To confound my analytical definition of journalism with any "consecration of the objectivity totem" (Peleg 2007, 3) is certainly unfair; and to evoke Mephisto and the Nazis in this context is clearly bizarre. In my critique of peace journalism, I was never referring to objectivity and objective reporting as a proper alternative. I agree with Peleg that the concept of objectivity has always been somewhat slippery and that few reporters could attest to total neutrality and impartiality. However, his critique is dishonest as he limits the concept to a metaphysical understanding of objectivity as an unattainable ideal. The view of objectivity as a method, on the other hand, is based on the procedural aspects of news production by referring to traditional standards of good journalism such as accuracy, balance, fairness and reliability (Lichtenberg 2000; Ward 1998). Framed in such a procedural perspective, objectivity is clearly possible and highly desirable.

Peleg (2007, 3) also suggests that my critical assessment of the epistemological foundation of peace journalism is inconsistent: "First (2004), peace journalism has a naïve epistemological perspective, then it matured to epistemological realism, since it assumes there is a true and proper version of reality and accordingly, peace journalism attacks conventional journalism as 'misrepresenting reality' by showing only partial facts (2007, 5). Finally, Hanitzsch [sic!] admits, peace journalism has no epistemology at all and its proponents need to define it."

This reading of my critique is rather dubious. As a matter of fact, I argued that *some* advocates of peace journalism subscribe to a naïve epistemological view on media coverage and that peace journalism as an analytical concept seems to be *prone* to epistemological realism. Then I moved on by contending that peace journalism may still have to *define* its epistemological foundation. This is not the same as to say that peace journalism has no epistemology at all. Journalism is "intimately bound up with claims to knowledge and truth" (Ekström 2002, 260); and there can hardly be any dispute over the fact that epistemology underpins *all* approaches to news making.

Conclusion

After all, the major disagreement between Lynch and Peleg and me is related to the much larger question of peace journalism's power to fight against deeply engrained standards of reporting as well as the organizational and institutional imperatives of news production. Peleg (2007, 4) writes that peace journalism "aims at individuals as agents of change and as harbingers of an innovative mind-set [...]. By so doing, peace journalism is thoroughly cognizant of the structural confines of the journalistic setting and one of its foremost challenges [...] is to mitigate and tone down the effects of structuralism." Judging from a thorough review of the literature in the field of journalism studies and from my own experience as a journalist, and having done extensive research myself, I am far less optimistic than Lynch and Peleg.

Like it or not, peace journalism stands at odds with the market-driven demands of commercial news production. Corporate journalism needs to "sell" content to an audience that is as large as possible, while at the same time, low budgets for news production degrade journalism's capability to enlighten society. In other media venues, most notably in public broadcasting and quality newspapers, progressive journalism already found its place, although it may not be called peace reporting but good or high-quality journalism.

In this respect, Peleg (2007, 2) makes an interesting argument: "Peace journalism asserts that a more appropriate standard for good journalism should be *fairness* and *accuracy*." In contrast to Peleg, I argue that exactly these values belong, in a procedural sense, to the basic and long-standing tenets of good journalism. How can peace journalists "hijack" these elementary values of good journalism and still claim that peace journalism is different?

I believe it would be much more acceptable for many reporters in the field if the peace journalism discourse is rather framed as part of the debate over the normative base of good journalism. Suggesting that peace journalism is something fundamentally different would mean to reach only a very small number of journalists who happen to cover conflict and war. However successful peace journalism will become in the future, these few reporters will never reach a critical mass that is needed to change the basic essentials and workings of corporate journalism. Hence, if Lynch argues that the fact that audiences became much more knowledgeable of the Palestinian conflict indicates an increase in peace journalism, I would answer that this is a promising sign of proliferating good journalism.

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