

Good journalism or peace journalism? – Counterplea by David Loyn

In *Peace Journalism and its discontents* Jake Lynch (2007) makes an important point in suggesting that the conventions of news reporting are not set down in stone, but are 'governed by structural factors arising from the economic and political interests of the news industry'.

We can change them and should examine them; I reject his charge that journalists such as myself dislike 'critical self-awareness'. If anything, journalistic self-examination is a growth industry in Britain, with the new Reuters-inspired institute at Oxford, the BBC College of Journalism, and intelligent and thoughtful practical inquiry now commonplace in fora such as the Frontline Club and Guardian Newsroom. The BBC's searching internal inquiries into Impartiality, Trust, and the specific review into coverage of Israel/Palestine, are all parts of a more rigorous approach to the craft – questioning received wisdom and conventional approaches.

Samuel Peleg's *Rejoinder* singles out as peace journalists 'Reporters who unreservedly uphold transparency, balance and sensitized thoroughness in covering disputes.' (Peleg, 2007, 4) I have met many reporters who do that without his peace journalism label. But in the same paragraph he puts himself firmly on the other side of the fence from me by saying that 'Preventing conflict...is not merely a journalist's job, but rather, everyone's job.' No it is not. There are a variety of occupations in which 'preventing conflict' is not a priority. We might argue over what were legitimate uses of military power, ie *intensifying* conflict, but the swift surgical intervention in Sierra Leone by a combination of British troops and mercenaries certainly transformed that country for the better.

By saying that my job is not about preventing conflict, I am not trying to invoke the Nuremberg defence of 'only obeying orders' but a far more subtle call to the real role of our real functions and role. The reference to the Nazi era is first cited by Peleg (2007, 3) in what he assumes to be a horrifying challenge to journalists to consider what it might have been like to report on Auschwitz. He does not give us enough information about the hypothesis of his case study to answer his shocked rhetorical questions about how normal journalism could have taken place. His appeal to Baudrillard's analysis of the TV war in the Gulf is entirely bogus, since Auschwitz took place in a time of total war, not as an armchair diversion. And who is his hypothetical reporter – a Nazi, a German working in the underground, or a foreigner? If it was the latter, then this reporting might have shortened the war, since at the time the full horror of the death camps was not public knowledge in Britain. If it was a reporter coming in with the liberation forces, then yes, 'good journalism' does require 'aloofness' in Peleg's definition. Consider how Richard Dimbleby, who went on to become the most prominent British broadcast journalist of his generation, reported the discovery of another death camp at Bergen-Belsen:

Here over an acre of ground lay dead and dying people. You could not see which was which ... The living lay with their heads against the corpses and around them moved the awful, ghostly procession of emaciated, aimless people, with nothing to do and with no hope of life, unable to move out of your way, unable to look at the terrible sights around them ... Babies had been born here, tiny wizened things that could not live ... A mother, driven mad, screamed at a British sentry to give her milk for her child, and thrust the tiny mite into his arms, then ran off, crying terribly. He opened the bundle and found the baby had been dead for days.

Peleg, like so many advocates of Peace Journalism, constantly wants the world to be better than it is, and so he shoots the messenger, the bearer of bad news. In criticising Hanitzch and myself, he compares reporters to doctors. In this analysis Peace Journalism is 'actually survival and abolition of war and destruction.' (Peleg, 2007, 3) So who could be against it?

But what if military intervention were the justifiable and best option? Peleg imposes an entirely pacifist construct onto journalism, making Peace Journalism more than the 'new-kid-on-the-block' (Peleg, 2007, 2), and turning it into a revolutionary position, always taking sides against military intervention.

In his paper Lynch writes approvingly of my own journalism, and I suspect that there is much more that unites us than divides us, in our desired outcome of the kind of journalism that we would like to see, in particular in seeking sources that are outside the official government machine.

We would certainly stand on the same side against for example, the facile certainties of Fox News, or the uncritical media hysteria this summer over the loss of the English toddler Madeleine McCann. We would also I suspect share concern over the lack of discernment in most of the British and American media in the run-up to the Iraq war in 2002/3. This led to more searching inquests in US newsrooms than in Britain, where the titanic struggle between the BBC and the government during the Gilligan affair obstructed other self-examination.

There are lots of things wrong in journalism, but in agreeing that there may be problems, we do not agree over a solution. In my initial paper in this dialogue, '*Good Journalism or Peace Journalism?*' I engaged in some analysis of the philosophical underpinning of journalistic tools such as objectivity. In this brief response, I intend to remain on much more practical ground.

Peleg (2007, 2) believes that the concept of objectivity 'is mainly evoked when it is perceived to be absent.' I disagree profoundly. I celebrate it since as a tool it gives me protection against the relativism of Peace Journalism. Peleg (2007, 6) accuses me of believing that the media has 'little or no political influence.' I have never said this. The media has enormous influence, so should be really careful about its methods.

The biggest problem with Peace Journalism is where it puts the reporter. It demands engagement as a participant, rather than recognising that while of course there is no such thing as a transparent observer, the implied contract with the audience is that the standpoint of the reporter is at least an *attempt* to be an observer; we are not there to make peace. This is the crucial difference between the Lynch analysis and my own. He constantly characterises my approach as pretending that there are 'facts' waiting around to be uncovered, 'intuiting the numinosity of a pre-ordained order, which the tenacious reporter can *reveal* (his italics).' My own experience in the field is quite unlike this caricature.

Reporting news is about addressing the complications of a messy, visceral world and constructing a narrative, telling stories, not 'searching under stones.' This may involve shining a light on some dark places, where the peace/solution-oriented seeker for conflict resolution would want to 'frame' the situation in a different way. But if people are out to kill each other then, as journalists, we are not there to stop them.

This is an organic process on shifting sands where we need constantly to examine preconceptions. In my paper I quoted approvingly for example the suggestion made by Professor Jean Seaton in *Carnage and the Media* that the way we report violence is highly stylised, with its own agreed iconography. This kind of examination of the conventions around reporting is welcome. It is a dynamic process, and there are few certainties.

But while I believe that practising journalists are open to probing inquiries about our methods and conventions, I stand accused of ignoring the Galtung analysis, relied on by Lynch. This hypothesis posits that journalists systematically select some gatekeepers and screen out others, in order to prioritise 'negative events, befalling elite individuals in elite countries'. I do not ignore it: rather I reject its practical relevance, and in particular the prescriptive tone that Galtung adopts in order to try to get us to change our ways.

Lynch (2007, 7) fails to throw off my charge of prescription, when he outlines a set of rules that need to be followed. These encourage journalists to seek peace, solutions, and people, (over violence, victory, and elites). The rules also claim the high ground of 'truth' contrasted with 'propaganda'.

The conclusion that normal journalistic practice (condemned as 'War Journalism') is 'elite-orientated', while Peace Journalism is 'people-orientated' is a throwback to the academic arguments that used to take place between bourgeois and Marxist views of history. Peace Journalism demands more of an examination of movements and processes than power. I am not sure it would sell many newspapers.

If all Lynch were saying was that there are some western governments who deliberately skew the case for war, then no one could have any argument with him. As reporters we can and do question and challenge their assumptions, and report those who do so. But power lies in the hands of those a democratic society has elected to hold it.

He goes on to accuse journalists of assuming that 'sources are passive, "revealing a reality that already exists". This is, of course, convenient for the authors of propaganda' (Lynch, 2007, 4). I do not believe that journalists assume any such thing. When conflict is looming, of course politicians 'spin' the war. But if reporters saw it differently we would not stop the war. And Britain has the most confrontational media environment in the world, aided by a certain irreverence on the part of journalists, the physical design of the House of Commons, and the adversarial criminal court system. Testing arguments in public is part of the culture, so that rather than an assumption that sources are 'revealing a reality', there is often an assumption of mendacity. This assumption was characterised by the reported comments of a prominent TV presenter that before every interview with a politician he is thinking: 'Why is the lying bastard lying to me today?' Peleg condemns this as part of the problem. He wants a 'less belligerent and masochistic political culture' (Peleg, 2007, 5) – as meaningful as a Bedouin wanting less sand.

Lynch criticises journalists for ignoring the wider context in the run-up to the Iraq war, because of their 'War Journalism' mindset, so they were 'receptive to propaganda from western governments who either do not perceive, or will not acknowledge, their own complicity in a sequence of cause and effect – the problem (Saddam Hussein, for instance) is located in the conflict arena (Iraq), so that is where the solution is to be found (removing him from power; later, capturing him, then trying, convicting and executing him).' (Lynch, 2007, 8)

This is simply not what happened. From early 2002, a year before the invasion of Iraq, there was little else going on in parts of the British government other than planning the war. We know from the leaked 'Downing Street memo' (<http://www.downingstreetmemo.com>) that with or without the UN, Tony Blair had decided to back the US with British forces, and we know from more recent American interviews that he turned down a specific offer on the eve of the war from President Bush to hold British troops back; Bush knew of his domestic political problems, but Blair wanted to join the war.

It may be the business of 'researchers in the field of Peace and Conflict studies', cited by Lynch (2007, 8), to see all this in a holistic comprehensive way, and to want to find another way out. It was the responsibility of the British news media though to report what was going on, and what was going on then was an unstoppable ratchet towards a major war. There is a continuing confusion with him and Peleg over the function of journalism.

There had been a significant amount of reporting in previous years about the arming of Saddam Hussein, in particular leading to the 'Supergun' affair, when Conservative government ministers in the early 90s were found to be encouraging British businesses to sell arms parts to Saddam Hussein against UN sanctions. But by 2002/3 the story was the war; the how/when/where questions were paramount. Other views were widely reported – the biggest rally in British history, matched in anti-war marches across the world, the polls showing strong opposition to the war, the reservations of some in the military – but the story was the war. The peace/truth/people/solution narrative demanded by Lynch was the business of those trying to stop the war. But reporting demanded other priorities. I have already conceded that British journalism should have carried out more searching inquiries into uncritical reporting of the WMD reports, but this is a small concern compared to the demands made by Lynch.

In another specific case study in his paper Lynch (2007, 4) comes back to the BBC Panorama programme *Moral Combat* that he has praised before. My principle objection to this programme was not, as he supposed, its historical narrative of how a coalition of the willing, outside the normal apparatus of NATO, the UN or EU, went to war. My objection was that it painted the Serbs as victims, and the Albanians as killers.

The course of the unfolding war in 1998-9 in Kosovo is becoming one of the most hotly contested periods of recent history. The international community did not, as he records, ride 'reluctantly to the rescue of a beleaguered minority'. They rode *enthusiastically*, at least in Blair's case, to the aid of what was a *majority* in that clearly defined region. As in Iraq, there was a clear decision to prepare for military action, not as a last resort, but as a new kind of foreign engagement – using armed force for moral causes – outlined by Blair in his Chicago speech, on the fiftieth anniversary of NATO, even while the war was still being fought (<http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page1297.asp>).

The conflict was part of a move by Blair's then new Labour government. He did not want another Bosnia, and was responsive to Kosovar views that they had been left out of the Dayton agreement. Other European countries were less enthusiastic, but were drawn along by British rhetoric. I remember a cartoon in a German newspaper showing Blair wearing an old British 'Tommy' helmet, jumping forward out a trench trying to lead other European leaders cowering behind him.

The war was not prosecuted quickly, because the Americans did not want to commit ground troops, and Serb and Yugoslav forces were competent at hiding from air raids, as they intensified the forced movement of Albanian-origin Kosovars from their homes. But that there would be foreign intervention was inevitable as early as September 1998, several months before the date Lynch chooses. I know this from intelligence sources I met on the ground in Kosovo then.

As a reporter with some acquaintance with this sequence of events, I have never taken a public stance on whether this was a 'good' or 'bad' intervention. But I do know how my reports were used: videos of casualties were copied, ferried to

Washington, and significantly shortened the period before NATO bombing began (Loyn, 2005, 308) Lynch chooses to attack this military intervention in his paper, seeing as a 'civil conflict exacerbated by interventions on the part of the international community that were, at best, bumbling and ineffective,' although he has no sources for his claim that this 'version of events has steadily gained in salience.' (Lynch, 2007, 4)

Lynch has a selective memory too when it comes to examining the 7/7 bombings. He accuses journalists of fitting in with a narrative drawn up by politicians and diplomats that 'that the world we encounter is not of our making' (Lynch, 2007, 4). He must have been watching different programmes and reading different newspapers to me. There was widespread reporting about the impact of Iraq on home-grown terrorism, and the risks of allowing segregated communities to develop in Britain.

Lynch concludes with an exposition of reporting in Israel/Palestine. He misunderstands the reasons for the BBC's internal review into reporting, and does not take account of the background context. This is the hardest story to report in the world, partly because of the huge lobbies that all sides can mobilise internationally.

These lobbies are not evenly balanced. Israel is a recognised state, with a democratic system, and the considerable acts of violence of its forces have an international legitimacy that is lacking from the violent acts of Palestinians.

The international Israeli lobby is well-financed, organised and highly motivated, putting significant pressure on news organisations worldwide to reflect its narrative of the situation. It has disproportionate influence in particular on US policy makers. The Palestinian cause on the other hand, although it has huge international support, is divided, and easy to demonise, particularly after acts of terror inside and outside Israel itself. The divisions between Fatah and Hamas have complicated this situation even more.

The internal BBC review was set up in this context, following academic research showing, for example, as I quoted in my initial paper, that the audience misunderstand who are the 'occupiers' and who the 'occupied'. It was not set up with the peace journalism remedy or construct in mind, but to redeploy traditional journalistic tools in a place where the dominant narrative is too easily hijacked by the most articulate, English-speaking side.

I have engaged in this debate not only because I am concerned about peace journalism muddying the waters of critical analysis of journalism, but also because it is important to keep this door open. Like any other field of human endeavour, journalism needs to look over its shoulder constantly at other ways of doing things, and in particular be aware of the best academic research. Even journalists such as myself, with the 'narrow conceptual horizons' ascribed to me by Lynch, can see that there is something superficially attractive about a campaign to give democratic space to peacemakers.

But artificially clearing this space is editorially suspect. Peacemakers need to fight for the right to be heard as much as any other voices in the raucous market place of news. Yes, Galtung has a point in saying that they are systematically excluded. But then they have not faced the hurdles of winning votes. A democratic system does tend, for very good and proper reasons, to report more on those who have power to change lives than those who do not. It is the responsibility of journalism to reflect the voices of the powerless, but on their own merits, because they are contribute to a better understanding of the world, not because the reporter takes a position promoting their views. Lynch's challenge to me to follow the Galtung hypothesis is based on the belief that Galtung's *weltanschauung* has been 'established' – another closed, concluded, concrete word.

The problem with the Peace Journalism prescriptions and rules is that they actually *exclude* constructive engagement in the kind of research and insights that Lynch promotes. The closed nature of the Lynch response, leaving him in what he might call a 'feedback loop', seems to put peace journalism far outside the daily practice of journalism. His desire to look at this scientifically further alienates him from practical dialogue with practising journalists. His own research into British media, about Iran in a period in 2005, finds that the 'overall peace journalism quotient was about 15%, although some important publications, notably the *Financial Times* (22%), had more' (Lynch, 2007, 10). This is not empirical research, but self-serving analysis setting its own goalposts.

Similarly Lynch chooses to say that much of my own daily reporting is 'peace journalism.' I reject this for the simple reason, as stated above, that I see Peace Journalism as coming from one standpoint. It was not my *intention* to commit Peace Journalism, and that is the key difference. I have met enough lunatics, (although perhaps not enough lovers and poets) in working as a reporter, and absolutely fail to see why Peleg believes that somehow my approach would exclude them. He goes on to deride my belief that we give attention to peace-makers only when they are 'successful.' I agree entirely with this textual criticism, since it is obvious that we report high-profile peacemaking disasters as well. I want to replace it with 'significant'. We report 'significant' peace initiatives, not insignificant ones. The point is that we do not go out *looking for* peacemakers. We go out to find out what is going on, engaging curiosity, and listening to poets, lovers and lunatics as well as everyone else, sifting for the flecks of gold that make the fragile narrative of a single news story on a single day. And yes, we try to report what *can be seen* as well as what is seen, not simply reflecting reality but exploring reality, not being

subdued by organizational imperatives, regarding and not being manipulating readers' interests – all demands made by Peleg of journalism. The difference between me and him is this: he wants to make peace; as a reporter I want to give him and every other viewer, reader and listener the material he needs to do that. But if I am *partial*, taking sides, then my reporting is suspect, and nowadays my perspectives are competing with lunatics, lovers and poets, not just in the field, but in the blogosphere. The only USP of conventional 'mainstream media' is impartiality, and we kick out the props from under us if we lose that.

I think it is all more complicated, and not so certain. In the 24/7 environment with the internet screaming for attention alongside other output, trusted journalists standing on agreed ground are soon going to be at a real premium. We face the challenges of globalisation, climate change, poverty, the compelling new thesis from Naomi Klein (2007) that capitalism thrives on disaster, and US threats to Iran (making conflict a fact all the way from the Mediterranean to the Indus). This world requires far more robust tools than those offered by Peace Journalism.

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