

Wilhelm Kempf

Dangers of peace journalism

Kurzfassung: Das Sendungsbewusstsein mancher Friedensjournalisten ist eine gefährliche Haltung. Was der Journalismus dazu beitragen kann, dem Frieden eine Chance zu geben, ist als Mediator zu fungieren, der den Konfliktparteien dazu verhilft, die kompetitiven Fehlwahrnehmungen und gesellschaftlichen Grundüberzeugungen, durch welche der Konflikt angeheizt wird, zu überwinden.

Wenn Friedensjournalisten jedoch ihre eigene Konfliktlösung anpreisen und durchzusetzen versuchen, sind Frustrationen unvermeidbar und münden schließlich in der Suche nach einem Schuldigen, der dafür verantwortlich gemacht werden kann. Selbst in den Konflikt verwickelt, werden sie damit ihrerseits zu einem Motor der Konflikteskalation.

Abstract: The sense of mission shared by some peace journalists is a dangerous attitude. All journalists can do to give peace a chance is to serve as mediators, helping conflict parties overcome the competitive misperceptions and societal beliefs that fuel conflict.

If peace journalists try to promote and impose their own solutions, however, frustration is inevitable and will finally result in the search for an evildoer who can be made responsible. Thus by involving themselves in conflicts, journalists can become unintentional agents of conflict escalation.

1. Introduction

Not long ago the world of peace research was shaken by two scandals. The first centered on Johan Galtung, who was suspended by the Basel World Peace Academy because in a lecture at the University of Oslo he recommended listeners to read the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (cf. Jerusalem Post 8.9.2012). The second scandal centered on Jake Lynch, who was accused of participating in a pro-Palestinian protest at the University of Sidney and of disrupting a guest lecture by retired British Army Colonel Richard Kemp (cf. Brennan 2015).

What specifically happened in these cases? And what does it have to do with peace journalism?

2. The Galtung Case

Well, first, Galtung and Lynch are two of the most prominent representatives of the peace journalism program and quasi serve as role models for many of their students, and second, they put themselves in positions that are suited to bring peace journalism per se into discredit.

Whether their actions justify calling them anti-Semitic is not the topic of this essay, and also the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on which both Galtung and Lynch have taken positions decidedly critical of Israel, will serve here merely as a sort of "real life laboratory" (Bar-Tal & Halperin 2013) in which we can study not only the dynamics of conflicts, but also the resulting obstacles to conflict transformation and peace journalism, as it were in a pure form. In our roles as scientists as well as practitioners, we should in any case keep cool. This is all the more important if we agree on a definition I have previously already recommended:

"Peace Journalism is when editors and reporters are aware of their contribution to the construction of reality and of their responsibility to give peace a chance." (Kempf 2012)

Naive pacifism is of little use for this end, outrage at allegedly identified "chief enemies of peace" rather detrimental, and irrational belief in conspiracy theories is downright fatal – and indeed regardless of where or on which side one supposes to have uncovered a conspiracy. All this accomplishes is no more than to divide the world into "good" and "evil" and thus to do exactly what Galtung (1998) accuses the approach he calls "war journalism" of doing.

And Galtung did just this when he said that six Jewish firms control 96% of American media and/or that it is today impossible to read the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* without thinking of the Goldman Sachs international investment bank.¹

¹ Cited from <http://www.israelwhat.com/2012/04/27/johan-galtung-and-his-anti-semitic-rant-in-humanist/> (Downloaded 2/16/2016).

Perhaps one could let the matter rest with the conclusion that it would have been better if Galtung – as announced on the occasion of his eightieth birthday – had withdrawn in a timely manner from public life. But the problem would not be solved by this.

The actual problem does not lie in Galtung as a person, but rather in the structural weaknesses of his peace journalism model (Galtung 1998), which – on balance – isn't more than the construction of an antagonism between peace- and war-journalism, combined with the moral appeal to take the right side, search for peace solutions and promote them. Conspiracy theories virtually provide an opportunity to explain the futility of his struggle against mainstream journalism.

If Galtung, who is honored by many as the father of modern peace research, has nothing more to offer, what can we expect from would-be peace journalists who try to follow in his footsteps? The criticism expressed by David Loyn (2007) that the diffusion of roles between journalism and activism makes peace journalism the opposite of good journalism has found all too clear confirmation in the "Galtung Case."

3. The Lynch Case

In their definition, Jake Lynch & Annabel McGoldrick even go a step beyond Galtung:

"Peace Journalism is when editors and reporters make choices – of what stories to report, and how to report them – which create opportunities for society at large to consider and to value non-violent responses to conflict." (Lynch & McGoldrick 2005:5)

The first part of this definition: "Peace Journalism is when editors and reporters make choices – of what stories to report, and how to report them..." understands peace journalism – entirely in Galtung's sense – as a variety of advocacy journalism and thereby situates it in proximity to propaganda and public relations. This is a state of affairs that, e.g., was sharply criticized by Hanitzsch (2007), and that I already had warned against in 1996 – two years before Galtung first published his model: „Peace journalism (...) should not mean either the adoption of oppositional propaganda (which is based on the same sort of perceptual distortions and misinterpretations as propaganda for one's side), nor should it be peace propaganda (which is characterized by perceptual distortions and misinterpretations with reversed signs)" (Kempf 1996: 53f).

The second part of the definition, "choices which create opportunities for society at large to consider and to value non-violent responses to conflict," diverges from Galtung, however, in that here it is no longer a matter of a peace solution, but rather of non-violent responses to conflicts. This also includes non-violent conflict measures taken by one or the other of the conflict parties, and insofar it is only logical if Lynch has chosen to become a defender of the academic boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement against Israeli "Occupartheid."² BDS is certainly a non-violent response. It is *not* aimed *per se* against the Jews or the Israelis, but rather against injustices being done to Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories. And – as former leading Israeli politician Avraham Burg (2014) explained in the Israeli daily newspaper *Haaretz*³ – it is also an effective means suitable to transform the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, "if the discourse changes from concepts such as strength and resistance to the level of rights and values."

The peace journalist Jake Lynch could have explained all this and much more to the interested public if he had only preserved his credibility. He lost this, however, by choosing to be an exponent of the movement (cf. Lynch 2015).

Sooner or later in every escalating conflict there comes a point in time when conflict parties begin to recruit supporters and build coalitions and try to make the opponent lose face (Glasl 1992). This happens on *both* sides, and hardliners on both sides resort to the most drastic means to discredit their opponents. No outrage helps against this, and if anything at all can help, then it is to prove one's own integrity.

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict this point has long since passed, and that efforts to discredit the BDS movement have found expression in anti-Semitism charges is also due not only to what Burg (2014) has called "hysteria over the boycotts and sanctions." Associations with NS slogans and boycotts of Jewish businesses "Kauft nicht bei Juden" (Do not buy from Jews) must be positively alarming for Holocaust survivors and their descendants – but also, e.g., for non-Jewish Germans who have learned the lessons of history. What was completely unproblematic in the struggle against South African Apartheid is a hot potato in the struggle against Israeli "Occupartheid."

Jake Lynch should have been aware of this, and he could have been, if the concept of peace journalism *sensu* Galtung were not lacking in any awareness of the dynamic of conflict escalation and the resulting social-psychological processes and cognitive-emotional changes in conflict perceptions.

² Composed of *Occupation* and *Apartheid*, Bar-Tal (2015) defines the term "Occupartheid" as "discrimination between populations on the basis of ethnic origin as a result of a lasting occupation that denies political and economic rights from the occupied population"

³ Cited here following the German translation, which appeared on 2/17/2014 in the Austrian daily newspaper *Der Standard*.

4. Conclusion

Most journalists want nothing other than to do good work, report truthfully and be recognized for this. If conflict reportage nevertheless often displays an escalation-prone bias, this does to be sure, among other things, lie in the mechanisms of news selection (Galtung 1998) and the production conditions of conflict coverage (Bläsi 2004, 2006), but above all, however, in that journalists are members of society and as such subject to the same competitive misperceptions (Deutsch 1973, 2000) as society in general.

There are always such misperceptions on all sides of conflict. They are, so to speak, motors of conflict escalation, and what correctly understood peace journalism can do is not more and not less than to correct these misperceptions. This is already difficult enough, because the misperceptions, particularly in long, intractable conflicts, often harden into societal beliefs (Bar-Tal 1998) that form an interpretation frame that literally makes any interaction between the conflict parties look like a further episode in the struggle between good and evil (Kempf 2003).

It is foreseeable that hardliners on all sides will defend their beliefs with all available means. As well correctly understood peace journalism thus exposes itself to the danger of being discredited. But one should not make it as easy for hardliners, as Galtung or Lynch have done.

References

- Bar-Tal, D. (1998). Societal beliefs in times of intractable conflict: The Israeli case. *The International Journal of Conflict Management*, 9/1, 22-50.
- Bar-Tal, D. (2015). "Love your neighbor as yourself". This is the core requirement for overcoming blindness caused by hate and fear needed for peacemaking. *conflict & communication online*, 14/1.
- Bar-Tal, D. & Halperin, E. (2013). The nature of socio-psychological barriers to peaceful conflict resolution and ways to overcome them. *conflict & communication online*, 12/2.
- Bläsi, B. (2004). Peace journalism and the news production process. *conflict & communication online*, 3/1+2.
- Bläsi, B. (2006). *Kein Platz, keine Zeit, kein Geld...? Konstruktive Konfliktberichterstattung und die Medienrealitäten*. Berlin: verlag irena Regener.
- Brennan, B. (2015). Pro-Palestinian protest investigated by Sydney University. ABCNews, April 2, 2015. <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2015/s4210162.htm> (Download 10.25.2015).
- Burg, A. (2014). Was ist falsch an Boykotten und Sanktionen? *Der Standard*, 2.17.2014. <http://derstandard.at/1389860609752/Was-ist-falsch-an-Boykotten-und-Sanktionen> (Download 2.20.2014).
- Deutsch, M. (1973). *The resolution of conflict*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Deutsch, M. (2000). Cooperation and competition. In: Deutsch, M. & Coleman, P.T. (Hrsg.). *The handbook of conflict resolution. Theory and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 21-40.
- Galtung, J. (1998). Friedensjournalismus: Warum, was, wer, wo, wann? In: Kempf, W. & Schmidt-Regener, I. (eds.). *Krieg, Nationalismus, Rassismus und die Medien*. Münster: Lit, 3-20. English translation: Peace journalism – A challenge. In: Kempf, W. & Luostarinen, H. (eds.) (2001). *Journalism and the New World Order*. Vol. 2. *Studying war and the media*. Göteborg: Nordicom, 259-272.
- Glasl, F. (1992). *Konfliktmanagement. Ein Handbuch zur Diagnose und Behandlung von Konflikten für Organisationen und ihre Berater*. Bern: Haupt.
- Hanitzsch, T. (2007). Situating Peace Journalism in journalism studies: A critical appraisal. *conflict & communication online*, 6/2.
- Jerusalem Post (8.9.2012). Swiss group suspends 'anti-Semitic' Norway scholar. <http://www.jpost.com/International/Swiss-group-suspends-anti-Semitic-Norway-scholar> (Download 10.24.2013).
- Kempf, W. (1996). Konfliktberichterstattung zwischen Eskalation und Deeskalation. *Wissenschaft & Frieden*, 14/2, 51-54. English translation: News coverage of conflict: Between escalation and de-escalation. In: Kempf, W. (ed.) (2008). *The peace journalism controversy*. Berlin: verlag irena Regener, 11-18.
- Kempf, W. (2003). *Constructive conflict coverage. A social psychological approach*. Edited by the Austrian Study Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution (ASPR). Berlin: verlag irena regener.
- Kempf, W. (2012). Peace Journalism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the German press and the German public. *Bulletin du Centre de Recherche Français à Jérusalem*, 23. <http://bcfrj.revues.org/6788>. (Download 4.15.2013).
- Loyn, D. (2007). Good journalism or peace journalism? *conflict & communication online*, 6/2.
- Lynch, J. (2015). BDS and the Kemp affair: clearing up misunderstandings. https://profjakelynh.wordpress.com/2015/05/17/bds-and-the-kemp-affair-clearing-up-misunderstandings/?preview_id=2 (Download 2.16.2016).
- Lynch, J. & McGoldrick, A. (2005). *Peace journalism*. Stroud, UK: Hawthorn Press.

The author: Wilhelm Kempf is Professor emeritus of Psychological Methodology and Head of the Peace Research Group (Projektgruppe Friedensforschung) at the University of Konstanz, Germany. Since 2002 he is the editor of *conflict & communication online* (www.cco.regener-online.de). His fields of research include quantitative and qualitative research methodology, nonviolent conflict resolution, peace journalism and the construction of social reality by the mass media. He currently works on a research project on "Criticizing Israel, coming to terms with German history and differentiating aspects of modern anti-Semitism".

eMail: cco@regener-online.de, Website: <http://www.pfkn.regener-online.de/>