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Towards a theory and (better) practice of peace journalism

Kurzfassung: Der vorliegende Aufsatz diskutiert das Konzept des Friedensjournalismus im Rahmen sozialpsychologischer und mediensoziologischer Theorien und argumentiert dafür, dass Friedensjournalismus als ein schrittweiser Prozess zu verstehen ist, der an den jeweiligen Eskalationsgrad eines Konfliktes, den Mainstream-Mediendiskurs und das jeweilige gesellschaftliche Klima anzupassen ist. Nur wenn er dies berücksichtigt, hat er die Chance Wirkung zu entfalten und zumindest die gemäßigten und einigermaßen argumentationszugänglichen Segmente der Gesellschaft zu erreichen. Hardliner, die sich bereits einem War Frame verschrieben haben wird er kaum überzeugen können. Im Gegenteil ist damit zu rechnen, dass sie ihren Standpunkt mit allen Mitteln verteidigen und auch vom Versuch der Diskreditierung des Friedensjournalismus nicht zurückschrecken werden. Um ihre Glaubwürdigkeit zu bewahren, müssen Friedensjournalisten daher ihre Integrität unter Beweis stellen und jegliche Rollendiffusion zwischen Journalismus und Aktivismus vermeiden.

Abstract: Situating peace journalism in the context of social-psychological and media-sociological theories, this paper argues that peace journalism can best be furthered by a gradual process of development that adapts it to the level of conflict escalation, mainstream media discourse and over-all societal climate. Only if it takes these factors into consideration can peace journalism be effective and reach at least moderate segments of society. Hardliners who are already committed to a war frame can seldom be converted, but rather will defend their beliefs using all available means, including attempts to discredit peace journalism itself. In order to maintain their credibility, peace journalists must prove their integrity and avoid crossing the line separating journalism from activism.

1. Defining peace journalism

In modern diplomacy, media serve as: (1) information sources, (2) communication channels for decision-makers, and (3) means to secure public support (Cohen 1986). They offer citizens means of interpreting the world (Lumsden 1997) and thus enable the political elites that control them to influence peoples' convictions and their resulting actions (Wolfsfeld 2004).

Accordingly, it matters how journalism and the media cover conflicts, and the media's peace mandate is anchored in numerous international treaties and documents, including the 1948 UN *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the 1966 UN *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and the 1978 UNESCO *Media Declaration*.

The legal anchoring of the media peace mandate in international law and its practical implementation are two different things, however. Since Lasswell's (1927) famous study of propaganda techniques in World War I, numerous media studies have shown that conventional conflict coverage is (often) biased in favor of perpetuating and escalating conflict and rarely complies with the professional norms of quality journalism.

It is clear from this that something should be done to counteract the escalation prone bias of conventional journalism and achieve good journalism even under the sensitive conditions of war and crisis. This is what the peace journalism project (Galtung 1998, Kempf 1996) is all about, and according to Lynch & McGoldrick's definition:

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)

This is a worthwhile viewpoint that raises some key questions and has, however, met with opposition from journalists and media researchers alike.

Creating opportunities to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict requires great commitment (on the part of both journalists and peace researchers who wish to advance the peace journalism project). It may all too easily result in a mistaken understanding of peace journalism to mean active participation as a peace-maker, which is simply not the journalist's role (Loyn 2007). Conflating the roles of journalism and activism and/or trying to promote and impose particular solutions may tempt peace journalism to overstep the borderline between journalism and public relations (Hanitzsch 2007), and the peace journalist himself can easily become a party in a conflict, thus reducing his credibility. This increases the danger that peace journalism could deteriorate into the opposite of good journalism (Loyn 2007). Recent scandals involving Galtung and Lynch show that this danger is more than just hypothetical (Kempf 2016).

Therefore, as a first step towards a theory of peace journalism, I will compare Lynch & McGoldrick's definition with a broader understanding of peace journalism that doesn't yet stipulate concrete requirements for what a peace journalist should do:

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: 2)

2. Conflict discourses

There are various ways to deal with this claim, and it is obvious that peace journalists must *make choices*. At the least a choice of whether to subscribe to peace journalism philosophy, a choice of how to understand their role in the complex co-construction of social reality, a choice to take responsibility, and a choice of ways to help give peace a chance. It is not obvious, however, whether they should also make choices *of which stories to report and how to report them*, or whether they should aim at creating *opportunities for society at large to consider and to value non-violent responses to conflict*.

Even though there can be no doubt that peace journalism makes a difference in which stories are told and how they are told, and although giving peace a chance includes considering and valuing non-violent responses to conflict, both claims are defined too operationally. First, an explicit decision on which stories to report and how to report them entails the risk that journalists might manipulate their products. Second, peaceful transformation of conflict involves much more than merely non-violent responses.

What a journalist can do, and what a peace journalist should do, however, is to become attentive to the kinds of questions with which he approaches conflict and the kinds of discourses he thereby engages in. These discourses include:

- a war discourse on questions like "Who is guilty?" and "How can he be stopped?" etc.
- a peace discourse that rather asks "What is the problem?" and "How can it be solved for mutual benefit?" and/or
- a reconciliation discourse guided by questions like "Who is the other?" and "How can we relate to each other with mutual respect and appreciation?"

Already the orientation of questioning makes a difference for which stories appear relevant and newsworthy (news selection) and what kinds of problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations and/or treatment recommendations appear reasonable (framing).

Depending on the kinds of questions with which a journalist approaches a conflict, his perceptions and the way he reports on it inevitably change. For this change to occur, he does not need to slip into the peace-maker role, nor does he need to make an intentional choice of which stories to report and how to report them.

If a journalist does not want to overshoot his goal, already the question of what sorts of discourse he will engage in or what sorts of discourse he will try to initiate is not entirely at his discretion.

Reconciliation is a long-term process that can extend over decades and is not just political-structural, but also entails far-reaching social-psychological changes: from developing a new view of the past to recognizing own guilt to changing the collective memory up to creating a shared historical narrative (Asmal et al. 1996). Trying to set in motion a discourse of reconciliation in the midst of violent conflict thus appears unrealistic and unlikely to succeed.

Co-existence is a precondition for reconciliation. Compared with reconciliation, this is a far more modest goal and certainly not the ideal of harmonious relations between two societies. Still, because it endows both sides with legitimacy, rejects violence and meets the opponent on an equal footing, it represents a necessary intermediate stage on the path to reconciliation. For co-existence, personal convictions, attitudes and emotions play a role that is just as important as that played by political structures and institutions (Bar-Tal 2004, 2005).

To lay the cornerstone for peaceful co-existence, it likewise does not suffice for political elites to conclude a peace treaty. Members of the affected societies must also support it.

It is always the conflict parties themselves that must ultimately find a conflict solution, and it is always they who must themselves take the long road from a peace agreement to reconciliation. What journalism and the media can contribute to this process is to serve as a mediator and improve communication between parties, reduce mistrust, enemy images and prejudices, help conflict parties understand the other side's interests and develop mutual empathy, etc. Only if it is modest enough to be satisfied with this role can peace journalism do justice to the imperative formulated by Kempf (2007: 3) to be not the opposite, but rather the precondition of good journalism:

Peace journalism = responsible journalism = good journalism.

3. Agenda setting, news factors and framing

Lynch & McGoldrick's proposal that peace journalists should decide which stories to report and how to report them is understandable, insofar as (1) media contribute to the social construction of reality. They do this, for one thing, by introducing specific topics into public discourse (agenda setting, cf. McCombs & Shaw 1972), and for another, by the way they treat these topics (framing, cf. Goffman 1974). (2) Galtung's (1998) four-factor news communication model suggests that already so-called news values (negativity, personalization, and elite-orientation on both personal and national levels) constitute a structural frame in which we see the world as divided between rich and poor, and at the same time between "good" and "evil."

The idea of practicing peace journalism by intentionally ignoring and undermining common news factors is a much too simplistic and voluntaristic conceptualization, however. Both,

- news factors that have effects on which stories are newsworthy, what importance and how much space should be assigned to them (Eilders 1997; Kunczik 1990),
- and framing that makes specific aspects of a perceived reality more salient, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman 1993),

are not at the discretion of journalists who feel primarily obligated to offer an accurate representation of reality. Manipulating them is not an appropriate aim of journalism, but rather of propaganda and public relations (Hanitzsch 2007).

What responsible editors and journalists can do, however, is to *not* let an alleged lack of news value restrict the coverage of issues they consider relevant. News factors are not as hard and fast as some authors (cf. Hanitzsch 2007) suggest and a wide range of empirical and experimental studies support this:

1. Content analyses of news coverage on the Middle East conflict during the Oslo Process (Annabring 2000; Kempf 2003a) and of German press coverage on France after the Second World War (Jaeger 2004, 2009) have shown that news factors like simplification, negativism and personalization are dealt with by the media in quite flexible ways.
2. Furthermore, in its preferences the public is far less oriented to news factors than commonly assumed. Thus, Wolling (2002) found that information quality is an essential factor in evaluating news reportage, and as Eilders (1997) has shown, the more political knowledge readers have, the less they will be influenced by traditional news factors. The better informed they are, the more they will have developed their own views about which aspects of an issue are relevant to them.
3. Although research by Bläsi et al. (2005) and Sparr (2004) indicates that traditional news factors like negativity and personalization do have an effect on readers' interest in further information, they also show that this effect is not homogeneous, but depends on the complexity of the articles.

Whether or not a story is newsworthy depends on the discourse in which it is reported. If peace is on the political agenda, news values change by themselves (Jaeger 2009), and there is only one news factor that peace journalism needs to decisively and intentionally reject: the alleged news value of simplification that reduces journalism to offering black-and-white pictures.

Conflict coverage that gives peace a chance necessarily displays a higher degree of complexity, but it can nevertheless achieve this without sacrificing audience interest. Experimental studies have revealed that simplification has no inherent news value, but – quite to the contrary – more complex reportage can stimulate audience interest even for issues that – in terms of traditional news factors – have less news value (Kempf 2005, Möckel 2009).

4. Peace journalism as a process

An antagonistic opposition of war journalism vs. peace journalism can further contribute to voluntaristic misunderstanding of peace journalism. Various tables contrasting the two approaches (Kempf et al. 1996; Galtung 1998; Kempf 2003a; Lee & Maslog 2005, Hussain & Rebman 2015) describe only some features of two extreme cases of conflict coverage, but are unsuitable as a blueprint for manufacturing peace journalism.

They can serve as checklists for evaluating the escalation or de-escalation prone tendency of media products (or discourses), but already here we must take into account the fact that the above-named extreme cases of conflict coverage rarely occur in pure form.

Most conflict reports include both escalation oriented (war journalistic) and de-escalation oriented (peace journalistic) features, whereby it is not sufficient to incorporate the appearance or frequency of certain text characteristics. The direction of a text results from the patterns they form (Kracauer 1952), and taken in itself,

even the escalation or de-escalation oriented valence of a text characteristic is often not unambiguous. If, for instance, proactive conflict coverage goes along with an "us" vs. "them" conception of the emerging conflict, this will not help much in preventing conflict.

The meaning of a text element is constituted by its contextualization. This must also be taken into account in constructing texts for teaching or research, in order to show how differently the same news story can be reported (cf. Lynch & McGoldrick 2004) or to study audience reactions to different versions of the same story (cf. Annabring et al. 2005; Bläsi et al. 2005; Kempf 2005; Kempf & Thiel 2012; Nerad 2009; Schaefer 2006; Sparr 2004; Thiel & Kempf 2014).

Anyone who has tried to write such a text knows how very much thought, time and effort this requires. Already for this reason, the checklists are simply too time-consuming to serve as tools for shaping real life news coverage. Moreover, they are not compatible with journalistic work routines, and beyond that, the very idea of manufacturing texts transforms the questionable impetus to make voluntary choices of which stories to report and how to report them definitely into the production of propaganda or public relations.

Above all, however, the escalation or de-escalation of conflict is a *process* in which war and peace represent only the opposite poles of a continuum (cf. Figure 1).

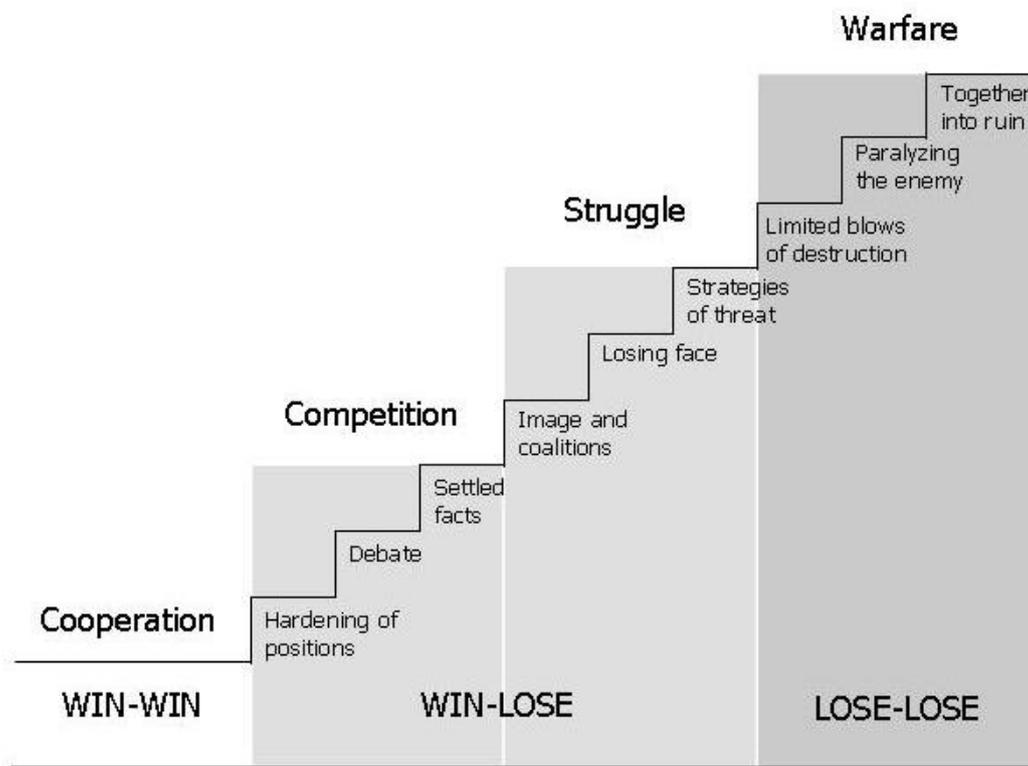


Figure 1: Stages and steps of conflict escalation (according to Creighton, 1992, and Glasl, 1992; from Kempf 2003a: 45).

Conflict escalation is usually not a linear process, moving forward step-by-step, however. It rather follows the pattern of "two steps forward, one step backward," and on every level of conflict escalation there is a chance of withdrawing, of step-by-step conflict de-escalation. Therefore, if peace journalism aims to reduce the escalation prone bias of conventional journalism and give peace a chance, we should not conceptualize it as simply the opposite of war journalism. We should conceptualize it as a *process* that gradually reduces the escalation prone bias of conventional conflict coverage.

As a result, the characteristic features of escalation- or de-escalation oriented conflict coverage are not constants, but depend on the current level of conflict escalation. Already the type of discourse that a peace journalist may reasonably employ should be adapted to the present state of conflict. For this reason, Kempf (2003a) distinguishes between de-escalation oriented and solution oriented conflict coverage, but this differentiation is still too rough.

5. Cognitive, emotional and social change

Any conflict can be conceptualized as either a competitive (win-lose) or a cooperative (win-win) process (Deutsch 1973, 2000). Cooperative environments characteristically display a mutual relationship between conflict parties based on shared rights and interests, involving cooperative behavior and providing common benefits to all engaged parties. Open communication reduces the danger of misunderstandings. It enables parties to explore interests behind conflict issues, elaborate a more adequate definition of the real problems they must deal with and optimize their contributions to resolving these problems. Working as a team encourages parties to empathize with each other and respect their mutual needs and interests. The process of cooperation thus minimizes defensive strategies and encourages mutually positive attitudes, makes partners more sensitive to common interests and reduces the importance attached to differences.

In a competitive environment, however, conflicts have a tendency to spread and escalate. This may lead to issue inflation, and a conflict may continue long after the original issues have lost their relevance (or even been forgotten). Competition reduces communication among parties: Existing communication resources are either neglected or used to intimidate or deceive the opponent. The opponent's statements or declarations are not trusted, and available information is evaluated in terms of existing prejudices. The win-lose principle implies that a desirable conflict resolution is only possible at the opponent's expense and can only be achieved by overcoming his resistance. Accordingly, it encourages the use of increasingly draconian and ultimately even violent means to achieve goals. In the end, the competitive process leads to mutual distrust and vilification by both parties. It thus reduces their sensitivity to shared interests and exaggerates the relevance of differences. The parties concentrate on power strategies and threats, pressure and deception tactics.

Competition among groups also affects their social structure. In-group coherence becomes stronger. Group members begin to identify more strongly with their group, and a reputation for defying the opponent enhances social standing. Leadership positions go to actors who adopt a confrontational strategy. Victory becomes the main goal, and group members who express a desire to cooperate with the opponent are suspected of disloyalty. Uncompromising belligerents are glorified as heroes, and neutral third parties are delegitimated if they do not intervene for their side's benefit.

Conflicts are open to conceptualization as a win-win process. However, a systematic divergence of conflict parties' perspectives promotes win-lose (or zero-sum) interpretations. Since people interpret their own actions in terms of the intentions they serve, while they experience others' actions through their effects (i.e. in the case of conflict: blocking one's goal achievement), there is a bias in favor of interpreting conflict with a win-lose model.

Conceptualizing conflict as a win-lose process, however, transforms it into an autonomous process (Kempf 2003a) where both parties think they are defending themselves against a dangerous aggressor and each provokes the other to continue and even escalate the threat. Whatever a party does to reach its goals has the negative side-effect of threatening the opponent's goal-achievement and will be experienced by the opponent as aggression. Whatever the opponent does to defend himself against this aggression will have the same negative side-effects on the other party.

The further this process goes, the more drastic become the means that conflict parties resort to in combating perceived threats. The more the struggle against the conflict opponent becomes a dominant group aim, the more influence group members acquire who distinguish themselves in this struggle, and the greater the group's distrust becomes for willingness to compromise and efforts to mediate. Ongoing entanglement in the conflict binds group members to their conflict strategy by justifying their previous participation and shifts perceptions of the out-group toward exaggeration of their dissimilarity from the in-group, with increased condemnation of the out-group.

This process of *competitive misperceptions* (Deutsch 1973, 2000) heats up conflict and becomes a motor of conflict escalation that goes together with specific changes in the conflict's cognitive-emotional representation (Kempf 2003a). Competitive misperceptions become increasingly radicalized along the dimensions of (1) conceptualizing conflict as a win-win, win-lose or lose-lose process, (2) unfairly assessing parties' rights and goals, (3) using double standards to judge their actions and behavior and (4) emotional consequences of these interpretations, which ultimately transform outrage at war into outrage at the enemy (cf. Table 1) and disengage group members from moral control of violence (Bandura 1986, 1999).

It is particularly in long-lasting intractable conflicts that these misperceptions harden into societal beliefs (Bar-Tal 1998). Among other things, these are characterized by belief in the justice of one's own cause and one's own victim status, de-legitimation of the enemy and faith in protecting personal and national security through a policy of strength, as well as in peace as the ultimate goal of war. They construct an interpretation frame (war frame) that makes literally every interaction between conflict parties seem like a further episode in the eternal struggle between good and evil.

Escalation step	Cooperation	Perspective divergence	Competition	Struggle	War
Conceptualization of the conflict	Win-win orientation	Bias towards win-lose but win-win still possible	Win-lose (possibly defused by rules of fairness)	Win-lose (increased by threat strategies)	Zero sum orientation. Violence as the appropriate means of solving conflict, emphasis on military values, transfer from win-lose to lose-lose
Evaluation of rights and aims	Mutual respect for the rights of all participants and emphasis on common interests	Focus on one's own rights and needs (including common interests), the rights of others, however, vanish from the field of vision	Focus on one's own rights and needs; common interests, however, vanish from the field of vision	Emphasis on one's own rights and needs combined with questioning the rights of the opponent and condemning his intentions.	Idealization of one's own rights and needs, at the same time contesting the rights of the opponent, demonization of his intentions and denial of common interests
Evaluation of actions	Consideration of the benefits of each of the parties	Focus on one's own benefits (also those resulting from the mutual relationship)	Focus on one's own benefits	Justification of one's own actions and condemnation of those of the opponent	Idealization of one's own actions and demonization of the actions of the opponent
Emotional involvement	Empathy and mutual trust	Conflict between threat and trust	Focus on threat to oneself, that to the opponent disappears from the field of vision, mutual trust is lost	Emphasis on one's own strength and the danger from the opponent creates a delicate balance between threat and confidence of victory; the threat to the opponent is actively denied; mistrust exists	Balance between threat and confidence of victory continues to exist, mistrust directed also against neutral third parties who attempt to mediate the conflict, outrage at the war turns into outrage at the opponent
Identification offer	Mutual	Self-centered	Dualistic	Antagonistic	Polarized

Table 1: Cognitive-emotional changes during conflict escalation (from Kempf 2003b: 5)

However, the same situations can be placed in a completely different light by changing the type of mental model used to interpret them. Like all other members of society, journalists can choose one of the sides to a conflict and adopt its interpretation frame (war frame). Or they can choose an interpretation frame (peace frame) that admits the justification of both sides' concerns, recognizes mutual victim roles, rejects de-legitimizing the opponent and tries to achieve personal and national security through a peace solution.

People create a picture of a conflict, or – more precisely – a mental model (Johnson-Laird 1983; Radvansky & Zacks 1997; van Dijk 1998) with which to structure their knowledge, interpret causes, judge conflict parties' aims and actions, understand the conflict's logic and give meaning to the whole. This is, however, not just a question of cognitive information processing or respectively the interpretation frame in which they place the conflict. It also has an affective component that consists, on one hand, in emotional closeness to (Kempf 2011; König 2013), and in the given case involvement in the conflict, and, on the other, results from ambivalences in respective interpretation frames.

Both the war and peace frames promise security but, at the same time, also create insecurity: The war frame promises security, because it allows tried and true behavioral patterns to be continued, but it creates insecurity, because it threatens a continuation of violence. The peace frame offers security, because it promises an end to violence, but it creates insecurity because new behavioral patterns must be tried whose effectiveness is still uncertain.

Furthermore, both frames under suspicion of competitive (war frame) or respectively *cooperative misperceptions* (peace frame): As well in cooperative conflict management, there are characteristic forms of misperception and misjudgment. Cooperation tends to weaken perceptions of contradictions and strengthen belief in the opponent's good will. These typical changes often help in reducing conflict and making escalation less probable. But they also carry the risk that conflict issues will be neglected, and conflict parties will engage in "premature cooperation" that does not lead to a sustainable agreement, because it does not sufficiently resolve contradictions, or disputed issues are not adequately worked out (Deutsch 1973, 2000).

If the resulting disappointment is blamed on the opponent, the escalation spiral resumes and gains even greater force. The overestimation of the Oslo agreements, which were really no more than declarations of intent to work out a peace solution, is literally a textbook example of this: euphoria over the supposed outbreak of peace, disillusionment, search for a scapegoat, allocation of guilt, revival of old enemy images (Mandelzisz 2003, 2007) and return to a *fait accompli* policy.

6. Construction of social reality

Most journalists want nothing other than to do good work, report truthfully and be recognized for this. Journalists do not report unrelated facts, however, they tell stories that give meaning to reported events. Which events, themes, etc. they consider worth reporting, how they should be evaluated and how one should react to them is a matter of how they understand the conflict and what relevance the events or respectively themes acquire in the frame of this conflict understanding. What they regard as "the" truth is therefore actually quite subjective and represents at best a socially shared reality. This is especially the case because they are themselves members of society and subject to the same socio-psychological laws that hold for all members of society.

The prerequisite for them to free themselves from socially shared competitive misperceptions and be able to avoid cooperative misperceptions is a foothold in the logic of cooperative dispute resolution, posing the right questions (see above), a healthy distrust of the plausible, analytic ability to recognize misperceptions, self-critique, as well as the right amount of patience, forbearance and tolerance of frustration. Well and good: these competencies previously played hardly any role in journalistic training. If journalists are, however, even just a bit familiar with the escalation logic of conflict perception, they can simply look at mainstream reportage and easily judge the degree of escalation a conflict has reached and how it is likely to develop.

The very concept of misperception has been resisted by authors like Hanitzsch (2004: 185), who claims that the *one* version of reality constructed by war journalism is as compatible with classical standards of truth as *countless other versions*.

Certainly, the relativity of reality is hardly a new idea. Already in 1958, later Nobel Prize Laureate Harold Pinter wrote: "There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false" (Pinter 2005: 1).

Once we begin to understand reality as a social construction, however, new perspectives open up that both go beyond simple relativism and permit a workable solution to the dilemma that troubled Pinter. Almost fifty years later, in His Nobel Prize Lecture he confessed: "I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?" (op cit.).

For in fact the relativism promulgated (not just) by Thomas Hanitzsch is based on the epistemological inadequacy of the so-called classical definition of truth, which asserts that a statement is true if it corresponds with reality. But as long as the concept of reality has not been defined beforehand and independently of the concept of truth, the classical definition is circular, and even if we had such an independent definition of reality, the classical definition of truth would still be logically incorrect. Statements and the states of affairs they describe belong to different logical categories that cannot be directly compared with each other. Put differently: Statements can only be compared with and correspond with other statements, and in this sense, they likewise cannot be compared with empirical observations, but only with statements about the observed.

Considerations like these already led the founder of formal logic, the mathematician and philosopher Gottlob Frege, to abandon the classical definition of truth, and to suggest that labeling a statement as "true" can be understood as an explicit commitment to prove it. Following this reasoning, the relation between truth and reality can then be conceptualized as a relation between the properties of statements and the properties of the states of affairs they describe: Statements describe states of affairs, and true statements describe real states of affairs (Kamlah & Lorenzen 1967).

Manifest thereby is the dependency of our speaking about "reality" (what actually is the case) on our ability to know in advance the truth of statements. "Not reality decides on truth (say physics or natural historical description), but rather their truth decides what is real" (Janich et al. 1974: 83).

At the same time, however, it is evident that the conceptual category of "true vs. false" does not apply to all statements. It only applies to statements for which there exists a well-defined set of rules on how to argue in favor of or against them, and whose confirmation or refutation can be measured against universal standards. But human action is guided by more than just facts. It is rather based on their meanings (Blumer 1973: 81), and the attribution of meaning does not follow universal rules.

The meaning of a fact depends on its context and on the perspective from which we examine it. The assignment of meaning is an interpretive process based on current interests and biographical experiences and – in our context most importantly – on social and cultural rules. Because different individuals, groups and societies have different interests and experiences, and because different groups, societies and cultures interpret the same facts according to different rules, the world of meaning is not homogeneous. Rather, it is made up of a multitude of alternative worlds that could be called subjective (personal, social and cultural) realities.

But even if we call them realities, we must not fail to see that subjective realities have a different methodological status than the reality of facts – which we might also call objective reality. They are not real in the same sense of the word as defined above. What can be true or false are only descriptions of subjective realities, explanations of how they are constructed, and analyses of their interactions. In itself, however, a subjective reality is neither true nor false.

Accordingly, the version of reality constructed by media is likewise neither true nor false. It is simply there and we must come to terms with it. But doesn't this have the same implications as Hanitzsch's relativism? Doesn't it immunize media reality against criticism? No, it really does not. With regard to subjective realities, however, the dispute about competing reality constructions cannot be a dispute about which of them is true. It can only be a dispute about which of them is *functional*.

Functionality is a relative concept, however, for nothing is functional per se. The concept of functionality relates states of affairs like reality constructions to the aims they serve. Although the way journalism and media interpret a conflict cannot be criticized as false, it can be criticized as avoiding conflict or escalating it, etc. – And insofar as it impedes or even excludes the option of conflict transformation, it can be criticized as misrepresenting reality (Kempf 2006).

In order to avoid falling into the trap of voluntaristic misunderstanding, peace journalism needs to be aware, however, that social reality is a complex co-construction involving a wide range of social actors (political elites and institutions, media companies, editors and journalists, audiences, etc.), and influencing factors that limit journalists' choices.

For a better understanding of this process, peace journalism can draw on a number of media-sociological and social-psychological theories. Among them are Herman & Chomsky's (1988) political economy of the media, Shoemaker & Reese's (1996) hierarchy of influences model, Bourdieu's (1988) conception of the media as a social universe functioning according to its own laws, Bläsi's (2004, 2006) model of social-psychological factors that influence the news production process, and/or Bratic's (2006) critical evaluation of media effect theories.

While Herman & Chomsky's "propaganda model overemphasizes structural determination, however, the hierarchy model may overplay the multiplicity and contingency of influences; and both models risk obscuring the specificity and coherence of journalism as a cultural practice and form of knowledge production" (Hackett 2007: 84f.). Also Bourdieu's conception of the media as a field that has developed a number of destructive characteristics that ominously work against the kind of discourse that peace journalism calls on news media to foster (Hackett 2007: 87). As well, Bläsi's model of influencing factors and the media effect theories reviewed by Bratic show, first of all, the limits of journalistic action and/or the scope of its effects. Peace journalism must take them into account, if it wants to avoid a voluntaristic misunderstanding of itself.

If we do not want to leave it at that and/or shelve the peace journalism project in view of seemingly insurmountable hurdles, we must stop thinking in terms of linear causality. Instead, we must search for strategies with which influencing factors can (partly) be neutralized, and (above all) for loopholes through which they can be circumvented and/or even exploited to reorient conflict journalism in a positive direction. First steps toward this goal are Bläsi's (2009) considerations on the implementation of peace journalism, as well as Bratic's (2006) proposal of ways how various types of media messages, audiences and environmental conditions can be utilized to advance the cause of peace.

7. Audience reactions and effects of peace journalism

To accomplish this, a minimal requirement is that peace journalism must have an audience, but Hanitzsch (2007: 5) questions whether it has one. He argues that news values resonate with audience expectations and concludes: "The main characteristic of news values is that they raise attention; and in our post-modern society, public attention is the central currency and thus becomes an increasingly limited good. Consequently, virtually everything in public communication is geared toward public attention, be it journalism, public relations,

advertising or entertainment. Mainstream media can ill afford to abandon news values, as this would jeopardize the economic base on which they are forced to operate. Ironically, in order to be successful in the 'marketplace of public attention', peace journalism would have to subscribe to the same values as does corporate journalism".

Meanwhile, however, a series of experimental studies speak against this reservation. Experimenting with different types of media and presenting differently framed news stories about a variety of conflicts to various types of audiences (for an overview see Thiel & Kempf 2014), the experiments reveal that conventional escalation oriented conflict coverage is no better at stimulating reader interest than de-escalation oriented peace journalism. Peace journalism does have a public, and recipients are more competent and more interested in differentiated representations of conflict than is often assumed (Kempf 2005, Möckel 2009).

As regards the evaluation of news texts as comprehensible, unbiased, balanced and impartial, etc., de-escalation oriented articles were never accepted less than other text versions (Bläsi et al. 2005, Sparr 2004, Kempf 2008, Möckel 2009, Schaefer 2006, Stuntebeck 2007, Kempf & Thiel 2012)¹. In most experiments (Bläsi et al. 2005, Schaefer 2006, Stuntebeck 2007, Kempf & Thiel 2012), de-escalation oriented texts were even better accepted, and Bläsi et al. (2005) found that lack of interest, in combination with a negative evaluation of articles, decreased steadily the less articles were escalation oriented and the more they were de-escalation oriented.

At the same time, however, these studies also reveal certain limitations that peace journalism should take into account:

- The acceptance of de-escalation oriented news articles is greater if they refrain from interpreting situations within a radically reversed framework (Bläsi et al. 2005, Kempf 2005). Background articles that do not just employ de-escalation oriented framing, but explicitly argue against the escalation oriented frames of mainstream coverage, are regarded as more partisan than articles that follow this approach (Jackson 2006).
- Whether de-escalation oriented media frames are accepted also depends on the audience: A difference in the acceptance of various text versions was not found for the readership of provincial papers (Sparr 2004), which is generally less interested in the topic (Kempf 2005), and Schaefer (2006) found a significant interaction between gender and text versions. Women are more likely to accept de-escalation oriented articles, while men are more likely to accept escalation oriented ones.

At the same time, these experiments also show that de-escalation oriented coverage does have an effect on recipients' cognitive-emotional responses to conflict:

- Lynch and McGoldrick (2013) found that peace journalism is associated with increased levels of hope and empathy and decreased levels of anger and fear, and
- Annabring et al. (2005) showed four versions¹ of three news stories about Yugoslavia after the fall of Milosevic² to a representative sample of German readers and found that the framing of the articles had a clear effect on the way participants understood the reported events and how they framed them in their own re-narration.
- Peleg & Alimi (2005) showed two groups of Israeli students differently (pro vs. contra) framed versions of an article about the Israeli government's ratification of the Road Map. They found that the majority of participants who had read a pro-Palestinian-state text were afterwards divided between "approval" and "approval/disapproval" of the statement that, "a Palestinian territorial continuity is *not* an existential threat to Israel," while "disapproval" dominated among participants who had read an anti-state text.
- Schaefer (2006) showed two groups of participants differently framed commentaries (escalation vs. de-escalation) on terrorist attacks,³ and found that de-escalation oriented texts produced a lesser tendency to moral disengagement and less acceptance of concrete military measures.

The audience is no passive recipient of information, however, but rather a "final arbiter, who chooses which of the available considerations are relevant and who decides how important each consideration should be" (Kinder 2003, 378). Accordingly, the possible effects of peace journalism should not be overestimated:

- A repetition of Peleg & Alimi's (2005) experiment with German students (Kempf 2008) did not find a general framing effect on participants' assessment of whether a continuous Palestinian territory was an existential threat to Israel.

¹ Moderately escalation oriented original articles from the German quality press and three variants of the same articles: (1) moderately de-escalation oriented, (2) de-escalation oriented and (3) escalation oriented.

² (1) Conflict in South Serbia, (2) the extradition of Milosevic to Den Haag and (3) the state treaty between Serbia and Montenegro.

³ Attacks by Al Qaida in New York and Madrid, by the Indonesian army in East Timor and the Aum sect in Tokyo.

- Nerad (2009), who showed two groups of secondary school pupils differently framed news articles about the planned construction of a mosque in Munich, found no general effect of win-win vs. win-lose framing on the degree to which participants perceived Muslim immigrants as a threat.
- Jackson (2006) found no general framing effects, but a frame-independent decline in moral disengagement after she showed three groups of students differently framed background articles on the history of the Russia-Chechnya conflict.
- Möckel (2009) showed two groups of participants Lynch & McGoldrick's (2004) paradigmatic (war- vs. peace journalism) TV features on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and found no general framing effect of the film versions on participants' moral disengagement.
- Stuntebeck (2009) showed two groups of students differently framed news articles about serious misconduct on the part of German soldiers in Afghanistan. After they had read the article, there was a frame-independent negative shift in their attitudes toward overseas German military deployment.

In accordance with prior research on framing effects Thiel & Kempf (2014) postulated that audience effects of peace journalism depend on recipients' *a priori* attitudes and/or the individual frames according to which they understand conflict. Based on this assumption, they explain the lack of general framing effects in these studies through a dominant peace orientation among German students that immunizes them against escalation oriented framing. This interpretation is also supported by

- Stuntebeck's (2009) results, according to which subjects presented with a responsibility frame (favoring foreign military deployment) changed their attitudes in a negative direction more than ones presented with a risk frame (against foreign German military deployment), as well as
- Haack's (2007) study, which presented three groups of students with differently framed news stories about a hypothetical extension of the UNIFIL mandate in Lebanon and found that risk framing reduced participants' support, while 'responsibility' framing was largely ineffective and did not lead to higher support rates.

Summarizing these studies' results, Thiel & Kempf (2014) conclude that news selection has a stronger effect on recipients' attitudes than framing. Merely devoting attention to a topic can be enough to bring about an (at least short-term) change in attitude, which is, however, strongly dependent on recipients' *a priori* mental models.

Strong support for this conclusion is provided by experiments of Kempf (2008) and Nerad (2009), who found frame-independent effects of participants' *a priori* mental models:

- Kempf (2008) captured participants' *a priori* mental models of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict via typical response patterns to the questions of (1) whether the conflict can only be resolved by a political settlement and (2) whether Palestinians are (in)capable of managing their own affairs. He found a decisive effect, although one that was independent of the respective media frame. After reading an article about ratifying the Road Map, participants' conviction increased that Palestinian territorial continuity is no threat to Israel, particularly among participants who interpreted the conflict with a de-escalation oriented mental model.
- Nerad (2009) also found a clear and frame-independent effect of participants' *a priori* mental models on how they changed their immigration-related threat perception after they read an article about the planned construction of a mosque in Munich. Assessing participants' mental models using a selection of items from van Dick et al.'s (1997) acculturation-scale, Nerad found that perceived threat increased among participants with a low acculturation score (which speaks for an assimilation/segregation model), while it decreased among participants with a high acculturation score (which speaks for an integration model).

Drawing on Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance, we may thus conclude that recipients may devalue, suppress or reject issues and frames contrary to their *a priori* mental models. Even on the highest stage of escalation, there is still a possibility of reversal and step-wise de-escalation. However, this is greatly impeded by societal beliefs that have hardened and become part of the societal ethos. As components of the psychic infrastructure that has enabled conflict parties to endure conflict in the past, they bind a society to the previous conflict strategy (Bar-Tal 1998), concede little free space to cooperative conflict management, and as well limit the acceptance and likely effectiveness of peace journalism.

8. Media frames, individual frames, and overall societal climate

In order to study this process, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict served as a real-life laboratory for an experiment (cf. Kempf & Thiel 2012, Thiel & Kempf 2014) that investigated the interaction between news selection, media frames and participants' individual frames (*a priori* mental models of the conflict). These were assessed during a pre-test

that classified them, via their positioning to the conflict, as pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian hardliners who interpret the conflict according to a war frame, or as moderates who interpret it according to a peace frame.

After filling out a pre-test questionnaire, participants were randomly assigned to six experimental groups. Each of the experimental groups read a news article that reported on either an April 2006 Palestinian suicide attack in Tel Aviv, or an Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip at the end of February/beginning of March 2008. Each of these scenarios was framed according to an escalation oriented pro-Israeli war frame, an escalation oriented pro-Palestinian war frame, or a de-escalation oriented peace frame that focused on the burdens of war for both societies (cf. Thiel 2011).

After reading the articles, participants were asked to evaluate them using a slightly modified version of the Bläsi et al. (2005) text assessment scale and to write an essay based on their own view of the events reported in the articles.

- Participants' evaluation of the articles (cf. Kempf & Thiel 2012) confirmed the hypothesis according to which media frames incompatible with recipients' a priori mental models are rejected as less comprehensible, more biased and less impartial. The stronger their a priori position in favor of one of the parties, the more participants tended to regard even media peace frames as partisan; the more they positioned themselves in favor of one side, the more they regarded reports about this side's use of violence as biased in favor of the opponent.
- Moreover, if hardliners were already committed to a war frame, they regarded balanced reporting which focuses on the burdens of war for both parties as even more partisan for the opponent than openly one-sided coverage in favor of the opponent's position. A possible reason for this may be that balanced coverage has a better chance to convince the moderate spectrum of their own society than coverage that sides with the opponent.

Content analysis of participants' essays (cf. Thiel & Kempf 2014) confirmed findings by Annabring et al. (2005), according to which escalation vs. de-escalation oriented media frames have a direct effect on how recipients make sense of the news stories they read. This effect is limited, however, by recipients' individual frames, which show both a direct effect and a complex interaction with media frames and media contents.

- Contrary to the widespread view that "violence sells," recurring stereotypical reports of Israeli and/or Palestinian violence seem to annoy (German) recipients. As a result, some participants did not really deal with the news items and declined to form a personal opinion about reported events.
- The effect of media war frames diminished if they were incongruent with participants' individual frames, and the propaganda function of reports on violence and victims (cf. Herman & Chomsky 1988) was neutralized if framed according to a media peace frame.
- If participants had already a priori positioned themselves in favor of the Palestinians, reports about an Israeli military operation with casualties on the Palestinian side encouraged a text understanding in favor of the Palestinians, even if the article was framed according to a peace frame.
- If supported by a pro-Palestinian media war frame, reports on a Palestinian attack with Israeli victims also did not reduce partisanship for the Palestinians, but instead stimulated resistance and definitely led to a text understanding favoring Palestinians. In this case, participants dealt in particular detail with the text in order to support and maintain their a priori position.
- Such a strong impact of recipients' a priori mental models was found only with participants who had positioned themselves in favor of the Palestinians, however.
- Pro-Israeli hardliners interpreted the reported events consistently in favor of Israel and more radically than pro-Palestinian hardliners did in favor of the Palestinians, and
- the propaganda effect of reports about Palestinian victims was generally weaker than that of reports about Israeli victims.

In order to explain these differences between pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian effects, Thiel & Kempf (2014) argue that the influence of peace journalism is due not just to interaction of news selection, media frames and individual frames, but also to their interaction with mainstream media discourse and societal climate. (In Germany), these are marked by: (1) ambivalence about the lessons of Auschwitz, which results in a conflict between unconditional solidarity with Israel and engagement for the universality of human rights, (2) suspicion regarding criticism of Israeli policy, (3) broad social consensus that condemns Palestinian attacks more strongly than Israeli military operations (cf. Kempf 2015), and (4) mainstream coverage that counteracts effects of reportage situations unfavorable to Israel through pro-Israeli framing (cf. Maurer & Kempf 2011, Gaisbauer 2012). On the one hand, there is (1) widespread belief that Israeli policy aims at continued oppression and

disenfranchisement of Palestinians (cf. Kempf 2015), and on the other (2) the dominant media image of Israel is that of an overwhelmingly superior power (Hagemann 2011).

Thus, the relatively weaker propaganda effect of reports about Israeli violence may be due to the stronger condemnation of Palestinian violence. The strong impact of a priori positioning in favor of the Palestinians may be understood as a counter-reaction to the inherent contradictions of mainstream coverage; and pro-Israeli hardliners' more radical interpretations may be attributed to long-term effects of the pro-Israeli bias of German mainstream reportage.

That pro-Palestinian hardliners are more reserved in this regard may, however, also be attributed to ambivalence about the lessons of World War II and/or fear of being labeled anti-Semitic.

This combination of sympathy for the Palestinians and efforts to avoid being labeled anti-Semitic could also explain the reluctance to form one's own opinion about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that was found with participants who had already a priori avoided taking a position on the conflict. This is, however, not an alternative interpretation. Rather, one can assume that all these factors are at work simultaneously.

9. Conclusions

No matter how we interpret these experiments' results, they show one thing above all: news selection and framing definitely exert influence on how recipients perceive conflict. This effect is, however, by no means homogenous, and how recipients actually understand news depends very strongly on whether and how they integrate it in their previous conflict understanding.

The latter, again, depends on whether they have any mental model at all of the respective conflict, whether they have already formed a rigid mental model of it, or whether they feel torn back and forth between alternative models (Thiel & Kempf 2014).

- If they haven't yet formed a mental model of the conflict, there is a good chance that they will adopt the media frame and – in the long-run – develop a mental model consistent with it.
- If their model is consolidated, and the media frame is compatible with recipients' individual frames, news will harden their mental model, but since it does not induce a change in the model, this (positive) framing effect will seldom be quantifiable.
- If the media frame is incompatible with recipients' mental models, however, it will most probably either be ineffective or produce a negative effect (in a direction contrary to the media frame) that immunizes the mental model against modification.
- If competing mental models are available to recipients, the media frame will activate the model consistent with it, produce a positive effect (in the direction of the media frame), and – in the long-run – this model may become dominant.

The influence of political news on recipients' conflict perceptions can thus be understood as a two-step process: In a first step, the media frame guides which mental model is actualized. In a second step, information is integrated into this model and aligned with existing attitudes (Haider-Markel & Joslyn 2001, Nerad 2009, Stuntebeck 2009), and as a result, the model itself undergoes gradual modification (Kempf 2008).

Although it is unwise to assume that individual news stories will have great effects on recipients' attitudes, we can still expect peace journalism to have long-term effects. As news-selection and framing influence recipients' text comprehension, and since it is not the information provided by a news story but rather the sense that recipients make of it which is integrated into their mental models, we can assume that consistent peace framing will gradually transform their mental models in a more constructive direction.

The target groups of peace journalism can, however, only be segments of society that are moderate and still more or less open to persuasion. Hardliners already committed to a war frame can rarely be convinced, and we must expect that they will devalue, suppress or reject issues and frames inconsistent with their a priori mental models. One must accept this and display the necessary self-restraint.

Interpreting conflict in a war frame not only sharpens perceptions of the opponent as despicable, it also strengthens distrust of mediation efforts. It causes even members of the in-group who simply want to promote balance and reconciliation to be regarded as covert saboteurs. This is also foreseeable, and peace journalism must anticipate that misguided radicals will try to defend their beliefs with all available means, question the integrity of peace journalism and/or denounce it for spreading hostile propaganda.

Refusing to participate in conflict, even if one is a target of attacks, requires a high level of frustration tolerance. One can most easily summon up this attitude if one does not take attacks personally, but rather views them as what they actually are: a widespread negative social-psychological phenomenon. Above all, however,

peace journalism must strive not to discredit itself by being drawn into conflict, whether by taking a stand for a specific conflict solution, propagating certain non-violent conflict strategies or even siding with one of the conflict parties.

The danger of becoming a conflict party is of course not specific to peace journalism, but exists quite generally for third parties. These only too often abandon a mediating position, pursue their own interests, try to impose a specific solution on conflict parties, perceive parties that resist this as their opponents, and end by siding with the party that appears more receptive to their position.

This is one reason why in the foreseeable future peace journalism will remain the domain of alternative media, and a broad implementation of peace journalism can most likely succeed in those conflict phases when conflicts are (still) taking place on a non-violent level. A society will be far more willing to accept peace journalism ideas and practices in a non-violent conflict stage than in wartime, when it feels itself massively threatened and/or its competitive misperceptions have already hardened into societal beliefs.

Only if it is successfully anchored in society and the peacetime media system does peace journalism have a real chance to also produce enduring effects in wartime (Bläsi, 2009).

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