Where I stand on peace journalism and the academic boycott of Israel

Abstract: In reply to Kempf's (2016) essay on "Dangers of peace journalism" the author argues that peace journalism has always been advocated as a way to implement the journalistic remit of factual reporting, and refutes the claim that it is tantamount to a call for journalism to act as any form of advocacy. Academic researchers who are the subject of a call by Palestinian civil society to boycott institutional links with Israeli higher education are in a different situation, however. They face a choice, either to participate in these links, and therefore become inadvertently complicit in the occupation of Palestinian territory, or to join the boycott which should be seen as a source of external pressure on Israel to cease its violations of international humanitarian law, and negotiate a just peace with the Palestinians.

I am not unique, but certainly unusual among peace journalism researchers in having enjoyed a long and successful career in professional journalism before taking up an academic post. That experience, culminating in a role as an on-screen presenter of BBC World Television News, instilled in me a healthy respect for the social function of journalism in enabling its publics to distinguish facts from claims.

In case there should be any room for doubt about this, we went on, a few pages later, to pose the question – and answer it – in explicit terms:

"Does Peace Journalism mean journalists... becoming advocates for particular solutions or initiatives? Hint: 'NO!'" (Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005: 18).

In a later text, I further argue:

"Peace Journalism is an advocacy position vis-à-vis journalism itself, but it is not trying to turn journalism into something else. If 'society at large' is provided with such opportunities, but chooses not to take them, then there is nothing else journalism can do about it, while remaining journalism. On the other hand, there is no concomitant commitment to ensuring that violent responses get a fair hearing. They can take care of themselves, because the reporting conventions (still) dominant in most places, most of the time, ensure that they seldom struggle for a place on the agenda" (Lynch, 2008: 3-4; emphasis in the original).

To return to my opening observation, the remit of journalism to report facts remains salient, and important. The immersion of peace journalism in the critical discourse of research scholarship, commonly with an orientation to communication or other social sciences, problematises this formula, however. It seems to rest on a correspondence theory of representation, which is difficult to justify in the context of dominant concepts in such scholarship, attentive to variants of social constructivism.

That is why I have revisited this very issue in my more recent work, A Global Standard for Reporting Conflict (Lynch, 2014), developing an argument – with reference to Jurgen Habermas’ concepts of the public sphere, and critical rational debate – in favour of socially constructed facts. If the world cannot be accessed as it is, then it can be assembled as agreed – at least in cases where an overwhelming weight of evidence has been processed by credentialled opinion, and with the caveat that agreement requires constant criticism and review, if it is to be regarded as reliable.
One important example of a socially constructed fact is the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Journalism should not treat human-induced global warming as merely one side of an argument, demanding to be ‘balanced’ by a countervailing, equally credible view. Another is the consensus of international legal opinion encapsulated in the phrase, “Israel’s military occupation of Palestinian territory”. It is right to report, as BBC journalism has often done since a landmark review of the corporation’s coverage by its Board of Governors in 2006, that Israeli settlements “are seen as illegal under international law”. East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza Strip are Palestinian territories. Israel is the occupying power. The Fourth Geneva Convention – universally accepted as customary international law – states baldly: “the occupying power must not move any part of its population into the territory it occupies”. These are not claims, but facts, and should be reported as such.

The occupation was further exacerbated by Israel’s construction of a so-called separation barrier, which closed off yet more Palestinian land from habitation. The barrier was declared illegal in an advisory judgement by the International Court of Justice, in 2004. The judgement put the onus on governments to cease cooperation with the illegality, but they took no action to do so. This is what led Palestinian civil society to call for an academic and cultural boycott of Israel: if governments will not take action, the onus to do so passes on to others who will.

Annabel McGoldrick (2015) has persuasively likened the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians to an abusive domestic partnership, in which Israel is the abuser, and the Palestinians are the abused. She quotes a psychologist, Lundy Bancroft, who runs programmes in the US for abusive men:

“The first challenge with an abusive man is to motivate him to work on himself. Because he becomes attached to the many rewards that his controlling and intimidating behaviors bring him, he is highly reluctant to make significant changes in his way of operating” (Bancroft, 2003: 334-5).

The pattern identified by Bancroft in abusive men is also a good description of the attitude of successive Israeli governments, not only in their controlling and intimidating behaviours towards the Palestinians but also in so-called peace talks. The latter have invariably been brokered by the United States, but Washington is also Israel’s main arms dealer and diplomatic protector. For all the hand-wringing on the part of the Obama Administration over settlement-building, for example, it still approved record military aid to Israel without conditions. As the chief Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat observed, after the talks brokered by then US Secretary of State John Kerry broke down without making progress:

“Israel refuses to negotiate sincerely because, as long as the status quo is so beneficial to it, Israel has no interest in a solution. Without firm signals from the international community, Netanyahu’s occupation and colonization policies are incentivised” (Erekat, 2014).

Following the US example, other governments engage in normal diplomatic and other forms of relations with Israel, despite occasional public criticism of its policies. No portion of these relations is made conditional on Israel’s behaviour, which enables the abuse to continue, and ensures the peace talks invariably fail, since Israel has no motivation to make significant changes of approach. As Bancroft remarks of the abusive men she has worked with:

“This reluctance cannot be overcome through gentle persuasion, pleading, or cajoling... I am sorry to say that I have never once seen such approaches succeed. The men who make significant progress in my program are the ones who know that their partners will definitely leave them unless they change, and the ones on probation who have a tough probation officer who demands that they really confront abusiveness. In other words, the initial impetus to change is always extrinsic rather than self motivated” (Bancroft, 2003: 335).

This is what I understand as the rationale for the campaign of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions on Israel, of which the academic boycott is a part. Apparently, this, in Kempf’s (2016) view, means I have “lost credibility”. The remark seems, on the face of it, to muddle categories and definitions on several levels. I am both a supporter and an exponent of a nonviolent, people’s campaign in response to a conflict in which peace is presently made impossible, chiefly by the reluctance of a powerful abuser to make significant changes of approach, in the absence of any extrinsic signal of the unacceptability of its behaviour. I am free to do that, as an academic researcher and a peace advocate. In 2015, it led me to intervene, at a demonstration at the University of Sydney, to ask security guards to stop dangerously manhandling student protestors who had occupied the stage of a public meeting, interrupting a speech by a retired British military officer, Colonel Richard Kemp, who was defending Israeli military actions against Palestinians. The incident led to allegations of anti-Semitism against me, which were comprehensively refuted by an investigation ordered by the University (Chalmers, 2015).

From journalists, I do not expect that they join me in my advocacy; rather, that they report on this nonviolent peace initiative in a fair and accurate manner. And, in my experience, some do – although others don’t. If I were still a reporter, and I suddenly started to advocate the boycott in public – or, indeed, any other policy on any other contested question – then of course I would lose credibility in that role. But I am no longer in that role. Which makes Kempf’s remark all the more puzzling.

Shinar, D. et al (2009) The Neaman Document – A study on Israeli Public Diplomacy; A Joint Project of the S. Neaman Institute, Haifa – another institution that is linked with the University of Sydney by a bilateral funded fellowship scheme. This report recommends various ways to, as it were, change the subject of debate in the international community, when it comes to Israel – inducing citizens of other countries to look past the treatment of the Palestinians, and the occupation of their territory, in favour of other aspects. As such, it is geared towards reducing political pressure for a change of policy on Israel’s part. Among its recommendations is to cosy up to what it calls "beneficial clients", including institutions of Higher Education. For me to have signed my name on Professor Avnon’s application for a Sir Zelman Cowen Fellowship would therefore have involved me in what is, ultimately, a hasbara exercise. The situation in which I found myself is a close match for one of the best-known aphorisms of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, winner of the Nobel and Sydney Peace Prizes:

"To remain silent in the face of oppression is not to be neutral, but to side with the oppressor" (in Younge, 2009).

If I, as a peace academic, enjoying my freedom to be a peace advocate, were to remain silent in the face of an abusive and oppressive relationship, I would deserve to lose credibility. As it is, however, I don’t.

References


The author:

Jake Lynch is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Sydney. He received the 2017 Luxembourg Peace Prize for his 20 years' work developing and promoting Peace Journalism. Before taking up an academic post, he worked as a professional journalist, with spells as a Political Correspondent for Sky News, and the Sydney Correspondent for the *Independent* newspaper, culminating in a role as an on-air presenter for BBC World Television News.

eMail: jake.lynch@usyd.edu.au