Peace Journalism as a Normative Theory: Premises and Obstacles

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Abstract

I will define peace journalism as a normative theory claiming that the media ought to play a positive role in promoting peace. The basic premise of peace journalism is that if contemporary media tend to play a negative role in terms of increasing the tensions between and among the sides of a conflict, they can also play a positive role by promoting peace and reconciliation. Although it seems a good idea to promote peace journalism in journalistic circles, we should be aware of the formidable obstacles to this practice. I will outline these obstacles and comment on them. I argue that Journalists find easier to follow the official line, or to "index" themselves to the "official politics". This protects journalists from criticism and helps them to "frame" conflict in a consensual manner. While this is the general trend, I will make some concluding suggestions to promote peace journalism as a suitable alternative to contemporary journalistic practices.

Introduction

Over the last decade, peace journalism has become a popular concept. According to McGoldrick & Lynch (2000), the term "peace journalism" was first used by Johan Galtung in the 1970s. There are a few books (i.e. Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005; Wolfsfeld, 2004) and a number of articles that have been published on the subject. Lynch & McGoldrick (2005) who championed the idea, define peace journalism in their book operationally: "Peace Journalism is when editors and reporters make choices –of what stories to report and about how to report them- that create opportunities for society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict" (p. 5). I will define peace journalism as a normative theory which claims that the media ought to play a positive role in promoting peace. I see it as a normative rather than descriptive theory in that it brings obligations to journalists about what to do, how to do and why to do. Similarly, Maslog, Lee, & Kim claim that this theory outlines "the benefits of peace journalism" and details "how it can be implemented" (2006, p. 23).

Normative theories stress the proper role and function of the media. They are distinct from descriptive theories in that they prescribe the "right" approach. Hallin argues that, "the field of communication, and most particularly the study of journalism, has always been heavily normative in character. This is due in part to its rooting in professional education, where it is more important to reflect on what journalism *should be* than to analyze in detail what and why it *is*" (2004, p. 5). Again, as McQuail shows, normative theories of the media are focused on how the media "ought to operate if certain social values are to be observed or obtained" (cited in Zelizer, 2004, p. 146). It is clear that peace journalism can be considered a normative theory as it requires journalists to act on certain obligations. This orientation can be traced back to social responsibility theory outlined by Peterson (1963). For Peterson, the theory has this major premise: "The press ... is obliged to be responsible to society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication in contemporary society" (1963, p. 74).

The Premises of Peace Journalism

The normative premise (Shinar, 2004, p. 2) of peace journalism is that if media play a negative role in terms of increasing the tensions between and among the sides of the conflict, they can also play a positive role by promoting peace. The question is, should the media promote peace? If yes, how can we make them do that? Shinar argues that, "the media should be involved in the promotion of peace, regardless of: a) Conservative objections to an alleged loss of objectivity linked with the promotion of peace; b) Theoretical and practical questions about what version of peace should be promoted; and c) Economic and political institutional constraints built into the media structure" (p. 2).

Although "peace journalism" as a concept is relatively new, the general idea has its roots in two important UNESCO documents. The first document is the Mass Media Declaration[1] which was adopted by the 20th session of the General Conference in Paris in 1978. Article 3 of this declaration is as follows: [2]

1. The Mass media have an important contribution to make to the strengthening of peace and international understanding and in countering racialism, apartheid and incitement to war.

2. In countering aggressive war, racialism, apartheid and other violations of human rights which are *inter-alia* spawned by prejudice and ignorance, the mass media, by disseminating information on the aims, aspiration, cultures and needs of all peoples, contribute to eliminate ignorance and misunderstanding between peoples, to

make nationals of a country sensitive to the needs and desires of others, to ensure the respect of the rights and dignity of all nations, all peoples and all individuals without distinction of race, sex, language, religion or nationality and to draw attention to the great evils which afflict humanity, such as poverty, malnutrition and diseases, thereby promoting the formulation by States of the policies best able to promote the reduction of international tension and the peaceful and equitable settlement of international disputes.

The second UNESCO document is the "International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism" adopted in the fourth consultative meeting of international and regional journalists in 1983 under the auspices of UNESCO. Eight international and regional journalism organizations representing 400.000 journalists approved this important ethical code[3]. Two principles of this code relate to peace journalism[4].

- Principle VIII, *Respect for Universal Values and Diversity of Cultures* states that "a true journalist stands for the universal values of humanism, above all peace, democracy, human rights, social progress and national liberation. The journalist participates actively in the social transformation towards democrative betterment of society and contributes through dialogue to a climate of confidence in international relations conducive to peace and justice everywhere."

- Principle IX, *Elimination of War and Other Great Evils Confronting Humanity* recalls the ethical commitments: "The ethical commitment to the universal values of humanism calls for the journalist to abstain from any justification for, or incitement to, wars of aggression. . .and all other forms of violence, hatred or discrimination, especially racialism and apartheid. . .By so doing, the journalist can help eliminate ignorance and misunderstanding among peoples, make nationals of a country sensitive to the needs and desires of others. . ."

The professional premise of peace journalism (Shinar, 2004, p. 2) calls for professional journalism organizations to adopt ethical codes which can guide journalists in producing peace oriented news coverage of conflictual issues. There are already some good examples throughout the world in that direction. The *Turkish Journalists' Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities* adopted by the Association of Turkish Journalists in 1998 refers to the idea of peace journalism in article 3:

The journalist defends the universal values of humanity, chiefly peace, democracy and human rights, pluralism and respect of differences. Without any discrimination against nations, races, ethnicities, classes, sexes, languages, religious and philosophical beliefs, the journalist recognizes the rights and respectability of all nations, peoples and individuals. The journalist refrains from publishing material that incites enmity and hate among individuals, nations and human societies[5]

Another good example is provided by the *Belarus Code of Professional Ethics of Journalist*. In article 4 of this ethical code, it says,

By recognizing the priority of universal human values over all others, the journalist works for humanism, peace, democracy, social progress, human rights. He abstains from all forms of approval of aggression, other forms of violence, hatred and discrimination, totalitarianism and tyranny.[6]

Obstacles to Peace Journalism

Gadi Wolfsfeld (2004) claims that, "the news media can play a central role in the promotion of peace. They can emphasize the benefits that peace can bring, they can raise the legitimacy of groups or leaders working for peace, and they can help transform images of the enemy" (p. 1). However, "the media often play a destructive role in attempts at making peace" (p. 15). In outlining the major obstacles to peace journalism, I will use two models which explore the news making process. The first model proposed by Shoemaker and Reese (1996), outlines five hierarchical levels: individual level, media routines level, organization level, extra media level, and ideological level (p. 64). In a similar fashion, Tılıç (2001), works on a "media system functioning model" in order to explore the decision making process of Turkish and Greek journalists. For him, there are five, interrelated levels: "the media atmosphere, media ownership, media institutions, the journalist and the receiver" (Tılıç, 2001, p. 55). Since these two models are very similar, I will reduce them to three levels: the individual, the media institution, and the ideological. Each of these levels is discussed below.

(1) Individual level obstacles to peace journalism

At this level, two types of values come into play: professional values and news values. The research on professional values demonstrates that most journalists adopt a neutral disseminator role (Weaver, 1998; Irvan, 2006). It is assumed that the way journalists conceptualize their role strongly influences story choice and the very idea of peace journalism has received criticism from professional journalists. For instance, Lyon (2003), for example, argues that the philosophy of peace journalism harms the integrity of the profession: "Our task is always to seek to find out what is going on, not carrying any other baggage. If there is conflict resolution we report on it in context: We do not engage in it" (p. 2). Professional value of objectivity also seems to be an obstacle confronting peace journalism. Galtung (2000) makes an interesting comment on this point: "I'd like to see objective journalists: by that I mean journalists who are able to cover all sides of the conflict" (p. 163). Lyon, however, sees peace journalism standing in opposition to objectivity: "I want to appeal for more traditional values such as fairness, objectivity, and balance – the only guiding lights of good reporting" (2003, p. 1). He further claims that ". . . objectivity has to remain a goal, the only sacred goal we have" (p. 4).

On the other hand, BBC journalist Martin Bell, while covering the Bosnian War, claimed that objectivity should be abandoned in favor of a "journalism of attachment" (cited in Hanitzsch, 2004, p. 487). Shinar (2004) appears to support this view when he suggests that: "Objections about the loss of objectivity can be countered with the argument that the transition of media roles from reporter/observer to participant/catalyst in international relations are part of the ongoing erosion of a mythical 'objectivity' and of the acceptance of subjective reality construction concepts" (p. 2). The news values of traditional journalism also create obstacles to peace journalism. The research on news selection processes demonstrates that journalists tend to choose those stories which fulfill the basic criteria of newsworthiness. Wolfsfeld (2004) highlights four news values that make the application of peace journalism almost impossible: focus on the immediate, search for drama, emphasis on simplicity, and ethnocentrism (pp. 15-23). He claims that the "default mode of operation for the press is to cover tension, conflict, and violence" (p. 156). Shinar demonstrates in a comparative study that the media prefer to use war frames even while covering peace negotiations (2004, p. 85); Fawcett shows that the Irish media find conflict frames more attractive than conciliation frames (2002, p. 221); Lee and Maslog reach this conclusion: "Clearly, the coverage of the four Asian conflicts is dominated by war journalism" (2005, p. 322)

(2) Media institutional level obstacles to peace journalism

The second obstacle comes from the media structure. The commercial media are profit oriented, and the peace process, at least in the short run, does not produce profit. As Shinar argues: "Based on competition, high news value and ratings, the current economic structures of the media entail a preference for war" (2004, p. 2). Wolfsfeld goes so far as to claim that "the greater the influence of commercialism on news content, the less likely that the media can serve as serious and responsible forums for public debate" (2004, p. 39). Ozgunes and Terzis (2000) make this important observation: "Greek and Turkish journalists admitted that 'everyday fear of losing our ratings and consequently our jobs' is one of the most prominent impacts of the commercialization of the broadcast media, and is also 'one of the main reasons why the Greek-Turkish conflict is reported in such a nationalistic and superficial way" (2000, p. 410).

(3) Ideological level obstacles to peace journalism

The third obstacle is the nationalistic tendencies in media circles. First, journalists find it easy to follow the official line, or they "index" themselves to "official politics" (Bennett, 1990). This protects the journalists from criticism, and helps them to "frame" the conflict in a consensual manner. Second, the media usually foster an ethnocentric view of the world (Wolfsfeld, 2004, p. 22). The stories are mostly about us, the good guys, and they are represented mostly as the bad guys. Wolfsfeld claims that,

> News editors assume . . . that the public has very little interest in learning about the life and society of enemies. Enemies are only of interest as threats . . . Even journalists who support a peace process will avoid writing stories that offend 'local sensitivities' . . . This ethnocentrism becomes especially blatant in times of crisis. When a peace process breaks down, the news media of both sides emphasize their own righteousness and the other's evilness." (p. 22-23)

Ozgunes and Terzis (2000) quote a Turkish journalist saying, "I am always thinking of our national interest and the interest of my newspaper when I am reporting Greek-Turkish affairs. At the end of the day I don't want to criticize my government because my 'objective' reporting might be used wrongly by the other side." (p. 416)

Conclusion

If peace journalism is a desirable alternative to traditional journalism, how can we realize it? My first suggestion is to create an ethical code of peace journalism. This ethical code must take into consideration the current problematic areas in coverage, such as labeling, demonizing, accusing, etc. There are already some important attempts in this direction in the works of Mowlana (cited in Becker, 2004, pp. 4-5), Tehranian (2002, p. 80-81), Galtung & Vincent (1992) and Lynch & McGoldrick (2005). I will outline an ethical code for peace journalism. The principles included in this code can be found in one or more of the proposals made by Mowlana, Tehranian, Galtung & Vincent, and Lynch & McGoldrick.

a) Mission oriented principles:
- Journalists should seek peaceful solutions.
- Peace journalism is truth oriented journalism. Journalists should expose untruths.
- Journalists should avoid becoming part of the problem -- they should try to become part of the solution.

b) Principles on news gathering
- Journalists should seek "non-elite" sources.
- Journalists should give more and positive attention to peace-makers.
- Journalists should try hard to verify all claims. Skepticism is an important quality of good journalists.
- Journalists should investigate the wrongdoings of all sides of a conflict.
- Journalists should focus on the process, not only on the specific events.

c) Principles on news writing
- Journalists should highlight peace initiatives.
- Journalists should focus on visible and invisible effects of violence and conflict.
- Journalists should provide background information.
- Journalists should always exercise the ethics of accuracy, veracity, fairness, and respect for human rights.
- Journalists should avoid victimizing, demonizing, derogatory, and inflammatory language.
- Journalists should avoid relying on the simple "us versus them" dichotomy.

Obviously this list of principles is not exhaustive. It needs to be discussed, elaborated, and improved.

My second suggestion is for the media. They can send more reporters to each other's side (Ozgunes and Terzis, 2000, p. 417). This will result in more coverage from the other side. They can employ reporters from each other's community. The newspapers can publish the articles of the columnists from the other community. More interaction will bring more understanding.

My third suggestion is for the universities. The universities have three important functions: teaching, research, and community service. Peace journalism is an ideal subject for Faculties of Communications in fulfilling these three functions. Especially the curriculums of journalism departments can be reshaped to give more space to peace journalism related courses. My last comment is this: *We should always remember that the media do not make peace, but they can positively contribute it.*

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End Notes

[1] *Declaration on Fundamental Principles Concerning the Contribution of the Mass Media to Strengthening Peace and International Understanding, to the Promotion of Human Rights and to Counter Racialism, Apartheid and Incitement to War*
[2] http://www.unesco.ru/files/docs/shs/decl_on_smi_eng.pdf
[3] They were: the International Organization of Journalists (IOJ), the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP), the Latin-American Federation of Journalists (FELAP), the Latin-American Federation of Press Workers (FELATRAP), the Federation of Arab Journalists (FAJ), the Union of African Journalists (UJA), and the Confederation of ASEAN Journalists (CAJ).
[4] http://www.ijnet.org/Director.aspx?P=Ethics&ID=8320&LID=1
[5] http://www.tgc.org.tr/englishbildirge.html
[6] http://www.uta.fi/ethicnet/belarus.html

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