**In defense of peace journalism: Choosing not to start a riot**

By Steven Youngblood, director, Center for Global Peace Journalism

It has been both fascinating and instructive the last few days to read reports from Belfast, Northern Ireland about a peace journalism workshop held there on Nov. 29. Judging from what I’ve read, workshop attendees largely reacted negatively to the concept of peace journalism.

The consensus, summarized succinctly on the Slugger O’Toole website, was that “the phrase peace journalism was found wanting by organisers and delegates alike…partly because the journalistic ethics that apply to conflict equally apply to peace (and every other situation…Moral judgments on (not so) “absolute” rights and wrongs end up being subjective…” (http://sluggerotoole.com/2013/11/29/little-support-for-the-phrase-peace-journalism-different-ways-of-seeing-facts-justice-public-interest/)

I’d like to take a moment to respond to some of the criticisms coming from Northern Ireland. Many of these criticisms stem from a fundamental misunderstanding of what peace journalism is, or more precisely, what it isn’t.

In News Letter, columnist Alex Kane says it is nonsense “that journalists and editors and commentators occupy some sort of moral high-ground on which they make great, profound decisions on how they can make the world or the country a better place.” (http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/why-i-d-still-write-this-even-if-i-knew-it-would-provoke-a-riot-1-5722877) This statement presumes that peace journalists openly advocate for peace, which they do not. Peace journalism, instead, seeks to give peacemakers a proportionate voice and to closely scrutinize claims made by those who advocate violence. (Balance and accountability, in the terms of traditional journalism). If both peaceful and violent alternatives are presented to society, and society chooses war, so be it.

Peace journalists would ask much less of Mr. Kane than making profound, moral decisions. Instead of making the world a better place, peace journalists would hope that at least he not make the world a worse place—to not exacerbate a bad situation, to not sensationalize an already emotional story, to not deliberately mislead and pander to his “primary audience.” The title of his column, “Why I’d still write this even if I know it would provoke a riot,” speaks volumes about the values of traditional journalism, and the now-antiquated notion that journalists bear no responsibility for the consequences of their reporting.

Kane goes on to say, “Because in precisely the same way that a variety of political parties and lobby groups steer every event to suit their own agenda, then so too will newspapers, programmes, blogs et al steer it to the needs of their core audience.” A peace journalist would ask, what are the needs of a core audience? Lacking expertise and experience in Northern Ireland, I would not presume to tell my colleagues there about their audience. However, in a broader context, peace journalists would argue that what is in the best interest of audiences generally is that they receive a broad, balanced perspective on the news—a perspective that isn’t overly reliant on official sources or sectarian or political propaganda. In the U.S., this approach suggests that the highly partisan media (Fox News on the right; MSNBC on the left) are doing a disservice to their viewers by providing stilted coverage.

Another peace journalism skeptic, John Mooney, argues on his blog against the idea that journalists should serve a common good. He writes, “The notion that journalists have a responsibility to the common good, the one that is decided for them by conflict resolutionists, brings to mind that 1950s USA blacklisted journalists as “un-American” and Stalinist USSR and Nazi Germany also regulated journalists. …I am claiming that the common good is a dangerous thing.” Mooney goes on to argue that feeding a common good can lead to censorship. He writes, “In short, I don’t believe in censorship…beyond a certain decorum. And I believe in people reporting what they see. And I believe in commentators and bloggers pushing their own agenda.” (http://fitzjameshorselooksattheworld.wordpress.com/2013/12/02/peace-journalism-letswritealongerism/ )

First, peace journalists also report what they see. If 20 people were murdered, we would write that 20 people were murdered. However, reporting that 20 people were “brutally massacred” adds nothing to the story except emotion—fuel for the fire. Peace journalism would argue that we have an ethical responsibility to not exacerbate an already volatile situation.

Secondly, journalists already make decisions every day about the common good. In hundreds of daily judgments, newspapers decide to put certain stories on page one because they are deemed important or significant. As journalists, we fundamentally believe that having broadly informed readers serves the common good. Isn’t it for the common good that the public knows about a corrupt politician? Isn’t it for the common good that we read that a charity needs more donations to buy food for the hungry? Peace journalists would argue that journalism is already in the common good business, and that our commitment not fueling violence is at least as desirable (for the common good) as holding politicians accountable for their misdeeds.

To be fair, Mooney's column is also critical of traditional journalism. His are not the words of an extremist, but someone who embraces the important role of journalism. Mooney writes, "To be honest, I am much more interested in justice than peace." The question, of course, is the proper role of journalists in achieving justice and peace.

Even if you bristle at the term peace journalism, consider the validity of its fundamental concepts which are shared by journalism as a whole—objectivity, balance, factual reporting, ethics, accountability, and responsibility. Given these values, I would not choose to write this or any other column if I thought it would provoke a riot.