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Good journalism or peace journalism?

Kurzfassung: Der Aufsatz argumentiert gegen die präskriptiven Vorstellungen des Friedensjournalismus; insbesondere gegen seine exklusive Natur und den Versuch, sich als eine neue Orthodoxie zu verstehen; und beschäftigt sich zu weiten Teilen mit der Kritik der Arbeiten von Jake Lynch und Annabel McGoldrick, wie sie 2005 in Buchform sowie in ihren früheren Reporting the World-Schriften veröffentlicht sind. Während Lynch & McGoldrick alle anderen Arten der Berichterstattung als ‚Kriegsjournalismus‘ verdammen, der zugunsten des Krieges verzerrt sei, halte ich dagegen, dass Friedensjournalismus das Gegenteil von Qualitätsjournalismus ist.

Viele der Argumente des Friedensjournalismus sind aus den Arbeiten von Johan Galtung abgeleitet, der die ‚Kriegsjournalisten‘ beschuldigt, über Krieg in geschlossenem Raum und geschlossener Zeit, ohne Kontext und unter Vernachlässigung von Friedensinitiativen zu berichten und Kriege ‚undurchsichtig/geheim‘ zu machen. Insbesondere fordert Galtung von Journalisten, die Suche nach Friedensvorschlägen, die als etwas Kleines, unterhalb der Wahrnehmungsschwelle Liegendes beginnen mögen, dann aber von Politikern aufgegriffen und übernommen werden können, zum Teil ihrer Mission zu machen. Meine Antwort darauf ist klar und einfach: friedensstiftende Politiker zu kreieren ist nicht die Aufgabe eines Reporters.

Ich betrachte die traditionellen journalistischen Methoden als Versuch, durch Objektivität zur Wahrheit zu gelangen, auch wenn eine perfekte Wahrheit unerreichbar ist; und komme zu dem Schluss, dass ein alltäglicheres Verständnis von Wahrheit, ‚Wahrhaftigkeit‘ dennoch handhabbar und immer noch (nach Thomas Nagel) von Wert ist. Nagels Darstellung hat den Vorzug, dass sie zugleich erklärt, warum Praktiken wie Friedensberichterstattung dafür prädestiniert sind, weniger objektiv zu sein als andere: "weil sie sich zur Übernahme einer bestimmten Perspektive verpflichten".

Der so genannte Journalism of Attachment hat Journalisten dazu verleitet, angesichts der Gräueltaten von Bosnien Unparteilichkeit und emotionale Distanz über Bord zu werfen und in ihrer Berichterstattung Partei zu ergreifen. Meines Erachtens könnte das Festhalten an Objektivität ein nützliches Mittel gegen den Relativismus dieser Journalisten sein.

Ich schließe mit einer detaillierten Betrachtung zweier Fallstudien, Kosovo und Nordirland. Die Lösung der Probleme dort ist in einer besseren Anwendung der bekannten Werkzeuge zu suchen und nicht in einem neuen Werkzeugkasten.

Im einundzwanzigsten Jahrhundert hat sich die Welt von der Clausewitz'schen Vision des Krieges als Fortsetzung der Politik mit anderen Mitteln dahingehend weiterentwickelt, dass diplomatische Lösungen herkömmlicher Art ebenso wie konventionelle Armeen schlechte Chancen haben, der aus asymmetrischen Konflikten resultierenden Bedrohung zu begegnen - ‚Krieg inmitten der Völker‘ ist der neue Slogan. Die Werkzeuge des Reporters müssen geschärft werden, nicht geändert.

Abstract: This paper argues against the prescriptive notions of peace journalism, and in particular its exclusive nature and attempt to define itself as a new orthodoxy. Most of the paper is a critique of the work of Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick, in a book published in 2005, as well as their earlier Reporting the World series. They condemn all other ways of reporting as 'War Journalism, biased in favour of war.' I argue instead that the opposite of peace journalism is good journalism.

Much of this peace journalism argument is derived from the work of Johan Galtung, who accuses 'war journalists' of reporting war in an enclosed space and time, with no context, concealing peace initiatives and making wars 'opaque/secret.' Galtung specifically calls on journalists as part of their mission to search out peace proposals which might begin as something small and beneath notice, but which might then be picked up and owned by politicians as their own. My response is clear and simple: creating peacemaking politicians is not the business of a reporter.

I examine the traditional journalistic methods of using objectivity to get at a version of the truth. I concede that perfect truth is unattainable, (and paradoxically the tool of objectivity we use to get there is slippery too.) I conclude that a more quotidian truth, or 'truthfulness' is though a manageable goal. I engage with philosophers who examine objectivity, concluding with the assistance of Thomas Nagel that it does still have a value. Nagel's account also has the merit of explaining how practices such as peace-reporting are bound to be less objective than alternatives, 'since they commit themselves to the adoption of particular perspectives, in effect giving up on the ideal of stripping away as much...as possible.'

I examine the responses of the so-called 'journalism of attachment' framed as a desire of journalists faced by the horrors of Bosnia to cast off impartiality and emotional detachment and take sides in their reporting. I argue that holding onto objectivity could be a useful vaccine against the relativism of 'attached journalists'.

I conclude with a detailed examination of two case studies, Kosovo, and Northern Ireland, arguing that in these complex visceral conflicts, the solution to known problems is better application of old tools, not a new toolbox.

In the twenty-first century the world has moved on from the classic Clausewitzian vision of war as a continuation of politics 'by other means', to a situation where threats of asymmetric conflicts will continually wrong-foot diplomatic solutions, as they are normally constructed, as well as conventional armies - 'war amongst the people' in the new jargon. The tools of the reporter need to be sharpened not altered.

1. Introduction

Peace journalism is at best meaningless, and at worst a uniquely unhelpful and misleading prescription for journalism in general, and broadcast journalism in particular. I intend to start with a detailed critique of it, drawing mostly from the book by Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick published in 2005,¹ as well as their earlier *Reporting the World* series. I will then set out my views of best practice in reporting, and tackle some of the themes that arose after a piece on this topic that I wrote online in 2003. I will finish with some case studies, highlighting two specific conflicts: Kosovo and Northern Ireland. The conclusions of this piece are those of a practising reporter, but I should stress that although most of my career has been with the BBC, this piece and the judgements in it are all my own work, and should not be taken as an expression of the stance of the BBC on these issues.

Lynch and McGoldrick demand nothing less than a 'revolution' in journalism practice, using this definition: 'Peace Journalism is when editors and reporters make choices – of what stories to cover and about how to report them – that create opportunities for society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict.'² The opposite of this, ie all other ways of doing journalism, are condemned as 'War Journalism, biased in favour of war.'³ I will argue instead that the opposite of peace journalism is good journalism.

2. Artificial prescriptions

The peace journalism approach describes an active participation that is simply not the role of a journalist, and is based on a flawed notion that the world would be a better place if we reported wars in a certain prescribed way, encouraging peacemakers rather than reporting warriors. This prescription is the more dangerous part of peace journalism, as it tries to define itself as a new orthodoxy. The idea that most reporters currently look only for the epicentre of violence, or are somehow addicted to conflict is absurd. If anything we *under-report* conflict in the world – certainly failing often to expose it in the early days, before major violence breaks out.

Most of the legal framework, and the codes of conduct by trade unions and responsible employers which we live and work in, provide a framework which proscribes what we cannot do – banning the unacceptable. That way we can continue to engage in robust sceptical inquiry, but also keep inside libel laws, and remain on the right side of civilised discourse (so we do not attach gender stereotypes to job descriptions, nor report racial origins, unless relevant to the story and so on.) But what is proposed by advocates of peace journalism is a prescription, defining a way of working which demands that reporters artificially seek out peacemakers. Leaving aside the merits or otherwise of the peace journalism case, this prescriptive nature alone should make it suspect. The searching inquiry carried out into BBC journalism by a former senior news manager Ron Neil in the wake of the Hutton debacle explicitly ruled out this kind of approach, saying 'Highly prescriptive rules inhibit good journalism'.⁴

The Peace Journalists draw on methods and analysis developed by academics engaged in conflict resolution, and quote a list drawn up by the veteran Peace Studies expert Johan Galtung.⁵ He accuses 'war journalists' of reporting war in an enclosed space and time, with no context, concealing peace initiatives and making wars 'opaque/secret.' This last suggestion is the most incomprehensible to me as a reporter who has covered several conflicts. Fighting against the opaque, lifting the cloak of secrecy, and reporting the history, the why as well as the who, how and what of war, are all key parts of reporting as I have seen it practised.

I once heard Galtung speak at a gathering of academics and journalists to discuss the Middle East where he painted a hypothetical picture of peace proposals which might begin as something small and beneath notice, but which might then be picked up and owned by politicians as their own. He exhorted us 'So gentlemen and ladies of the press, how much have you done recently to create such politicians?' My response is clear and simple: creating peacemaking politicians is not the business of a reporter.

He gave as an instance of press 'failure' the lack of reporting of a peace plan put together by the former UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar in the Balkans in 1991 before the worst of the slaughter in Croatia and Bosnia. It was not us who did not take it seriously. It was Milošević and his Serb nationalist proxies, echoed in Croatia, who were busy provoking a war. We should get cause and effect the right way round. The peace plan was not dead in the water because it was not reported. It was not reported because it was dead in the water. Galtung's track record at conflict resolution was admirable. But he misunderstood our role and power. One of the most acute observers of that conflict, Ed Vulliamy of the

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1. Peace Journalism – Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick. Published by Hawthorn Press 2005
 2. Op cit p5
 3. Op cit pxvii
 4. Neil Report - www.bbc.co.uk/info/policies/neil_report.shtml
 5. Op cit p6

Guardian, reported that the whole thing was quite clinically laid out from the start in Zagreb and Belgrade, 'There was no place for a shared country in the War of Maps that was already under way behind the scenes. The Serbs and the Croats opposed but understood each other as they resurrected their ancient dreams...For those dreams to be realised, the Muslims of Bosnia would have to be dealt with.'¹ It was one of the comprehensively reported conflicts of modern times. There was context, understanding and compassion in the accounts, although there was also increasing frustration among journalists that what was happening on the ground was not well understood in London, Paris and Washington as governments did not want to get involved. This led directly to the desire to practise so-called 'Journalism of attachment'.

I will return to this theme later. But the key point to be made here is that reporters need to preserve their position as observers not players. Galtung's demand that journalists should become active participants, playing a part in the complex 'cat's cradle' that makes a conflict, is wrong. By *searching* for peacemakers, reporters are immediately on the wrong side of the fence. Reporting and peacemaking are different roles; reporters who give undue prominence to passing peace plans, or search for peacemakers, distort their craft and do not serve their audience.

3. Emotions and trauma

Some of the analysis in *peace journalism* appears to be at variance with my own experience. The authors claim that damage to psychology and culture is 'routinely omitted' by reporters, while there is a 'concentration on visible damage and destruction'. This is simply not the case. Rather there is a strong emphasis now on how people feel, and almost *too much* coverage of 'trauma.' Take the Darfur crisis. It is actually quite hard to get images of damaged villages and of the fighting itself, but the personal suffering, the 'damage to psychology, structure and culture', is not 'omitted', rather it is at the centre of most coverage.

And yet, that is not to say that everything is fine. There is a glibness about much reporting of trauma, meaningless throw-away analysis leading to nonsense lines like 'A community traumatised like this can never recover,' and a preponderance on seeking grief in place of understanding reality. The day after the July 7th bombs in London, an impromptu peace garden was set aside by the Thames, some way from the scene of the explosions, where people could come and sit and sign a book. It was a dignified low-key place, spoilt only by the intrusion of a foreign TV crew. As a BBC reporter at the scene put it: 'The only traumatic thing here is the way this Argentinian reporter keeps coming to ask people why they are not more upset.'²

Ensuring better emotional literacy for reporters in a world that understands this area much better would be useful. Mark Brayne is the Director of 'Dart Europe', a group dedicated to better reporting of traumatic events, as well as better care for reporters who cover them. He wants reporters who cover conflict to be as well trained in this as they might be in understanding defence equipment, not as an optional add-on: 'They are more likely to be authentic and impartial (much better qualities in journalism than "truth" or "objectivity") if they, and their editors, have an understanding of their own psychology and blind spots, and of the psychology of the story and its players. In other words, the media must become much more "emotionally literate".'³ This is not peace journalism but a mechanism for a more complex understanding of context, as well as the safety of journalists in its widest sense. Yes, we need to report emotions better, but not throw out established journalistic tools along the way.

4. Best practice – Truth and objectivity

Brayne's parenthetical throwaway of truth and objectivity provides the cue for the next section of this piece: concerning best practice in journalism. In an otherwise supportive review of a piece I wrote against peace journalism for the Open Democracy website⁴, the distinguished philosopher Julian Baggini took issue with my view that although there cannot be a 'single truth', the *pursuit* of truth should still be the goal of reporters. For him 'the pursuit of truth is impossible if there is no truth to pursue.'

It all depends what we mean by truth. Philosophers like to quote Pontius Pilate's famous question 'What is Truth?' It comes in answer to the only words Jesus offers in his defence in his brief overnight trial: 'For this I came into the world, to bear witness to the Truth'. This is Truth, with a capital 'T', multi-faceted and all-knowing, not the compromised quotidian truth of the average news story (which may still be 'true' in the sense of not being 'false'.) In the metaphysical sense of the word a perfect understanding of truth is not available to any person, and this is what I meant by 'truth' being unattainable. But the *pursuit* of an ideal is surely philosophically coherent, even though we know that we will fall short.

1. Seasons in Hell – Ed Vulliamy St Martins Press p10
2. BBC Radio Five Live 08/05/05
3. www.istss.org/publications/TS/Summer05/media.htm
4. www.openDemocracy.net 20/02/03; Baggini response 15/05/03

Baggini may not agree, but comes to my aid by offering 'truthfulness' in place of 'truth' as the better term to use. He quotes from *Truth and truthfulness* by Bernard Williams, who defines truthfulness as 'a readiness against being fooled and eagerness to see through appearances to the real structure and motives that lie behind them' – a good definition of the reporter's craft, and similar perhaps to the 'ratlike cunning' once famously said to be one of the only three qualifications necessary for journalists (the others being a plausible manner, and a little literary ability).¹

For Baggini there is no such thing as 'the (his emphasis) true account. This is because any account has to be selective, not for any sinister reasons, but because you can't describe any event coherently without leaving out some details...there are many true accounts, and they are made true by the fact that they describe true descriptions of what happened.' So there may be many versions of the truth, all different, but still all as true as each other, since none is false. By striving to be *truthful*, we can do the job well.

But apart from my metaphysical/secular distinction which holds truth to be an impossible ideal, but still worth pursuing, there must surely be other *degrees* of truth-telling (or truthfulness) which are different from the on/off, true/false, definition held to by Baggini. We all know how politicians are adept at speaking in a way which may be 'true' in the sense of not a lie, but still misleading and not the whole truth. The Neil Report is a useful source because it was a rare attempt to define some of these elusive qualities of journalism at a time of great challenge to the BBC. Neil found that while reporters need 'to strive to establish the truth of what has happened as best we can', this is not an exact science. The role of an Editor is to make a judgement without siding with one version of the truth: 'to ensure that the journalists reporting to him/her assess where the weight of expert opinion lies in a story without adopting it as a truth or wisdom. The scale of BBC journalism carries risk.'²

So what about objectivity, the other quality rejected by Brayne, who prefers his reporters to be 'authentic and impartial'? It has a different function from truth. While truth (or truthfulness) may be a *goal*, objectivity is a *tool* to reach it, and an essential one. Baggini supports this wholeheartedly, drawing on the work of Thomas Nagel in *The View from Nowhere*, a deliberately paradoxical title; every view has to be from somewhere. Nagel proves that there is such a thing as objectivity, opposed to subjectivity – giving as an example the physics of light waves as against our perception of colour: one objective, and the other subjective. Baggini says that this relates directly to journalists who can achieve objective reporting by working to remove their particular, local perspectives. 'Sceptics who retort that such biases can never be fully removed are simply stating a trite truism. Of course they can't, and that is why the ideal of pure objectivity – a "view from nowhere" – is chimerical. But that in no way undermines the idea that maximising objectivity is an achievable and worthwhile aim...the idea that journalists should be striving for objectivity is neither anachronistic nor incoherent...Nagel's account also has the merit of explaining how practices such as "peace-reporting" are bound to be less objective than alternatives, since they commit themselves to the adoption of particular perspectives, in effect giving up on the ideal of stripping away as much of these as possible.'

On this analysis, if we accept that objectivity is at least a worthy aspiration, even though not a tool to achieve the 'whole truth', then peace journalism fails a key test by imposing other expectations onto journalists.

How does objectivity work in practice? Anyone who has ever interviewed two observers of the same incident knows that there is no perfect account. Each reporter takes a 'view from somewhere.' When a Russian armoured infantry company arrived in Kosovo out of the blue in 1999, after the NATO bombing campaign but before NATO ground troops, and seized the airport in a sneak raid, a British and a Russian journalist would have covered the same event completely differently. There could be no agreed narrative – but both would use the tool of objectivity to tell the story in their own terms, and in the terms understood by their viewers, listeners or readers. The Russians were greeted as liberators by the embattled Serb minority, who had been cowering in their basements during the long bombing campaign. But they were seen as a major security threat by the American military, in overall command of the operation. (A British commander on the ground disobeyed a direct order to engage the Russians militarily, saying he 'did not want to start World War III', instead surrounding them at the airport, and providing them with water, while a compromise was agreed).

Reporters live in a social context and share a language and certain assumptions with their audience. To help the language of reporting, there is a constant if unspoken dialogue between the reporter and the reader/listener/viewer: shared assumptions that make it easier to report some stories than others, with foreign news the hardest. There is a shorthand saying in the BBC newsroom, 'New readers start here', to describe the clarity and context required to explain some pieces. Others are seen as part of a continuing narrative.

This is not a simple part of the newsgathering process, and there are obvious dangers. The assumptions need to be constantly examined, and some do not help understanding, particularly where they condemn a whole group as evil. Here Lynch

1. Sunday Times – Nicholas Tomalin
2. Neil Report - www.bbc.co.uk/info/policies/neil_report.shtml

and McGoldrick do have useful points to make, even quoting from a piece of mine, that analysed how the demonisation of the Taliban directly affected the course of history, encouraging hardliners rather than moderates in Afghanistan, with dire consequences. It was the hardliners who hosted those planning the events of 9/11.¹ The demonisation, which became a shared journalistic assumption, was something begun by western governments. A fuller understanding of the causes of the rise of the Taliban, and the reasons for their evident popularity, would have better informed both the public and policy makers. (Similar mistakes were made with regard to the reporting of Hamas after their election victory in Gaza and the West Bank in 2006.)

But surely the antidote to this is a fuller context in the reporting of events, not discarding objectivity. Both the reporter and the audience need to know that there is no other agenda than explaining what is going on – that what you read, see on the screen or hear on the radio is an honest attempt at objectivity; that reporters treat any and every event with an informed scepticism, rejecting any attempt to co-opt them into involvement. Better reporting of the Taliban meant finding out what they were about, not promoting 'non-violent responses to conflict'.

5. Objectivity or attachment

Objectivity alone though is not enough. In his revisionist history of the media and Vietnam, Daniel Hallin found that objectivity distorted what was happening because it meant that official accounts were not challenged. 'The effect of objectivity was not to free the news of political influence, but to open wide the channels through which official information flowed, often to keep issues off the political agenda by disguising major decisions as apparently routine and incremental.'² A similar process happened, particularly in Britain and America, although not mainland Europe, in the run up to the Iraq war in 2002/3. Official sources crowded out almost all other voices, so that each day's news coverage became an 'objective' trawl through the laid-on events, but did not tell the whole story. Hallin is quoted in Jean Seaton's towering book *Carnage and the Media*, where she argues that what I have called 'shared assumptions' are actually a highly formalised set of images, as profound as medieval icons, and bringing the television of conflict into the same psychological space as was filled by the circus in Roman times.

For Seaton the response to critics like Hallin, is not to discard objectivity in favour of peace journalism, since the pursuit of facts remains the source of authority of the news. 'Impartiality and objectivity are indispensable tools; rather than criticize the concept, it is more fruitful to consider the structures that support better or worse practice.'³

No analysts of objectivity discard it as ruthlessly as the Peace Journalists. Most others would rather see it put in its proper place, refined but not rejected. Philip Hammond attempts a complex definition of objectivity.⁴ To him it comprises three distinct, though interrelated concepts: truthfulness and accuracy, neutrality, and emotional detachment. 'These are inter-related in that journalists are supposedly dispassionate and neutral so as not to let their own emotional responses and political allegiances get in the way of reporting truthfully.' His *supposedly* gives it away; he does not really believe it. In my experience reporting can be hugely passionate, requiring emotional engagement and human imagination. But it is not about my passion, how I feel. Although the feeling reporter has become a fashionable way of reporting, even on some channels that should know better, the viewer or listener does not want to know how I feel. What they want to know is how people feel on the ground. Reporters are the channel for their passion – not active players. Hammond though is more worried about the loss of another of his three elements in objectivity – neutrality. This has come under hardest attack from 'journalists of attachment' or 'advocacy journalists' as they are known in America.

It was the BBC correspondent Martin Bell, frustrated by the quagmire of Bosnia, who first coined the term journalism of attachment. He no longer wanted to 'stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor'. Similarly in the US, the CNN correspondent Christiane Amanpour said 'the classic definition of objectivity can mean neutrality, and neutrality can mean you are an accomplice to all sorts of evil.' But to Hammond, in an analysis of the reporting both of Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s, this approach can end up as being as bad as the 'yellow press' of the 1890s in the US, that was 'thrilled by the consciousness of its moral responsibility'. The dominant journalists' narrative in Bosnia put most of the blame on the Serbs. And although Hammond goes rather too far in wanting to say they were all as bad as each other, his conclusions make uncomfortable reading, blaming some journalists for substituting *attachment* for *neutrality*, closing their eyes to things that don't fit: 'contemporary human rights journalism involves suppressing inconvenient information, distorting public understanding of conflicts, applauding the deaths of designated western hate-figures, and ignoring evidence of the destructive effects of western involvement.' In a harsh conclusion, he finds that this approach can in the end 'legitimise barbarism.' The final death toll in Bosnia was around 100,000, and around 40 per cent of the

1. www.opendemocracy.net 4th April 2002
2. The uncensored war – the Media and Vietnam D.C. Hallin OUP 1986 p35
3. Carnage and the Media – Jean Seaton Allen Lane 2005 p198
4. Moral Combat – Philip Hammond p177 of Rethinking Human Rights ed David Chandler, published Palgrave Macmillan 2002

civilian casualties were Serbs, which was not the dominant narrative of those who reported it.

'News' is what matters, what gets into the political bloodstream, what counts. It can be jagged and visceral and uncomfortable and sometimes it does not work. Every reporter has had the unnerving experience of the exclusive story which dies a death because it is not followed up; it does not have any meaning or 'traction'. That is why the 'journalism of attachment' emerged in the mid-90s in Bosnia. The political establishment in America and Europe did not want to get involved, so they wrote it off as a Balkan tragedy where ancient ethnic hatreds had been awakened. The spin from inside western governments blocking engagement ran counter to the stories of the deaths of tens of thousands and the unravelling of civil society. So the journalists became frustrated. Their reporting was not having any 'effect'. They wanted to be liberated from the yoke of objectivity – to be allowed to 'tell it as it is' – to take a position condemning the Serbs. It was always an elitist demand, giving a special licence to the few.

The 'journalism of attachment' feels like the same self-serving western luxury as peace journalism itself, although at the other end of the spectrum. How could it have been managed for example in a BBC language service newsroom, staffed during the Balkan conflict by Bosnians of all shades, Serbs, Croats, Macedonians, and Albanian speakers from both sides of the Kosovo border? If the Martin Bells and Christiane Amanpours of this world were licensed to report with 'attachment' then these journalists would legitimately ask why it was not all right for them. It is not all right for any reporter.

But the advocates of peace journalism are seeing the spectrum completely differently. They tend to lump everyone else together – those (like myself) who insist on objectivity, including a commitment to neutrality, along with the journalists of attachment who want to be able to name evildoers. For them we are all 'War Journalists'. This single-minded contempt is allied with name-calling: 'Otto the objective Ostrich',¹ digging his head into the sand in the face of all the glittering evidence collected by the Peace Journalists to change his mind. In this caricature Otto is seen to be left only uncovering the 'facts', not the whole nuanced and complex business of impartial objective reporting. Advocates of peace journalism cannot see that holding onto objectivity could be a useful vaccine against the relativism of 'attached journalists', since they prefer their own relativism instead. That's the problem with throwing out methods that work, rather than seeing how they might be made to work better.

There is an arrogance in the analysis by some promoters of peace journalism that is unnerving, as if they are the only guardians of a redemptive flame of truth that will set us free. Lynch and McGoldrick bring together a list of approved non-violent leaders,² included to promote the idea that somehow they are ignored. They are all pretty mainstream, but they are paraded to promote non-violence as an alternative to violence as a solution to the problems of the world. This is more idealistic than most of the rest of the wishful thinking in their book, but it also makes a mockery of the demand that journalists should *seek out* peacemakers. This list, including individuals as well as groups like the mothers of dead soldiers in Buenos Aires, and the rolling Leipzig demonstrations of 1989, is comprised of non-violent protestors who were reported. When activists like these make a difference, they are given proper prominence.

6. Some case studies

The theoretical constructs of peace journalism bear very little relation to how actual conflicts can actually end, and the role of the press. There is actually some nobility in this – believing the best of people, building consensus around peace and not war, and so on – but the world is not a noble place.

In one stark example, the gruesome war between Iran and Iraq finally ground to a halt in 1989, not through any clever peace plan, or complex journalism that understood the whole cat's cradle, but because the US shot down an Iranian airliner by accident. To America's surprise, Iran did not respond militarily, and offered a ceasefire, because they 'could not fight the US as well.'³ Iraq was exhausted by the war and accepted quickly. In the messy, visceral, real world, this random and accidental act of extreme violence, by a potential new party to the conflict, had the unintended consequence of ending a long war.

In the twenty-first century the world has moved on from the classic Clausewitzian vision of war as a continuation of politics 'by other means', to a situation where threats of asymmetric conflicts will continually wrong-foot diplomatic solutions as they are normally constructed as well as conventional armies. The tools of the reporter need to be sharpened not altered.

1. Op cit p195
2. Op cit p78
3. Against all enemies – Richard Clarke The Free Press 2004 p 102

6.1 Kosovo

When fighting broke out in Kosovo in 1998, only two years after the Dayton agreement had finally forced a close to the Bosnian conflict, NATO was much readier to get involved quickly than they had been in the early days in Bosnia. They were willing to bomb the Serbs after 'only' a few massacres. A highly effective guerrilla campaign by the Kosovars secured the end of Serb control because of the willingness of Europe to become engaged militarily. There were not any demands for 'journalism of attachment' from the reporters such as myself who covered Kosovo, as our account became the 'dominant narrative.' Evidence of Serbian atrocities on the ground fitted the willingness of Tony Blair, only one year in office, who saw this as a place where his then unsullied policy of 'moral warfare' could be tested.

The effect of this was that the coverage played into the hands of the Kosovo Liberation Army, whether they engineered the media aspect of their conflict or not. They were hard to work with for the media and hostile to most reporters. But their military campaign was mostly targeted at Serbian and Yugoslav security forces, although some Serb civilians and government employees died as well. The KLA's key assessment was that NATO would intervene if the Serbs retaliated against civilians, which they duly did.

Lynch and McGoldrick see this series of events as 'war propaganda' working because it fitted with 'the established conventions of war journalism',¹ which in their view concealed the true nature of the conflict. Rather than the sequence of Serb atrocity and world reaction ratcheting up towards war in 1999, as the events uncovered by journalists working in Kosovo became the dominant narrative, they see another process altogether. Far from *revealing* things, it turns out with the 20/20vision of a peace journalism analysis in hindsight that reporters on the ground were *concealing* the real course of events. They quote a BBC Panorama programme as uncovering the real extent of Kosovar Albanian perfidy,² breaking ceasefires, and being re-armed by agents from Britain and America. 'This fact was uncovered long after the war by a major BBC investigation; at the time, it was kept deadly secret, since it risked contradicting the basic propaganda narrative of Serb 'repression' of a defenceless population.'

This is not what happened. The truth is that this Panorama was a rather curious essay trying to be clever after the fact, a throwback to the old Balkan analysis that 'they are all as bad as each other.' Its most bizarre rewriting of the facts was to recount *more* incidents of dead Serbs than dead Albanians in 1998, the year before the NATO bombing raids, focusing on the town of Pec in the west, close to some of the most important shrines in Serbian Christian history.

I had spent a fair amount of time in Pec, or Peja, as the Albanian-origin majority call it, during 1998. I had been to several funerals of Albanian Kosovar civilians, shot for nothing in broad daylight, (none of these was in the Panorama). And I been in the streets where surly gangs of Serbian youths, many of them refugees from other parts of Yugoslavia, swaggered and boasted, running an effective curfew that made it too dangerous for the Albanian Kosovar majority to go out after dark. In its clever counter-intuitive way the Panorama programme interviewed instead a Serbian priest, hardly an unbiased witness, who said that it was the other way round, that Albanians persecuted Serbs there.

I had seen as well the horror of crammed maternity clinics, in the back rooms of private houses, and the classrooms in farm buildings, because for more than a decade the Albanian majority had been excluded from access to any state facilities. I had watched Albanian families being burnt out of their homes in the countryside around Pec/Peja in the summer and autumn of 1998, sent into internal exile, camping and dying in the mud in the forests and mountains.

And I thought Lynch and McGoldrick wanted context and background. Very little of this history was in the Panorama account, so intent was it at redressing some kind of 'balance,' and uncovering the 'fact', at the time 'kept deadly secret' that the guerrilla force the KLA increased in confidence and broke ceasefires that winter. What a surprise. The Albanian dead were not in isolated attacks, like the dead Serbs 'uncovered' for the 'major BBC investigation,' so highly regarded by this post-facto revisionist account. They were piled up in dozens across Drenica, in Obrije and Racak, and all the other places that forced themselves into the world's consciousness in 1998/99. The Albanian majority had had enough of rule by Belgrade.

Another part of the alternative history of Kosovo in *peace journalism* puts the strength of the KLA down to the CIA, said to be 'training, equipping, and preparing the KLA for war.' The sole evidence for this is a Sunday Times account, but on it is built the theory that the war was thus engineered by western agents. It does not feel like the whole truth – the KLA had been preparing for several months already – but even if it were, again it can not have been a shock, certainly not worth the emphasis put on it by Lynch and McGoldrick. By this time, there were UN resolutions condemning the Serbs, and active war-planning going on in NATO forces. They would have been failing in their military task if they did not have some discreet forces on the ground already, making contact with the KLA, and yes, surprise, surprise, possibly giving them military assistance. And of course as the fighting intensified, the leaders of Kosovo's majority population, 'long-time advocates of non-violence and a negotiated settlement' were displaced to the head-shaking despair of the advocates of peace journalism; as

1. op cit p 99
2. BBC Panorama 'Moral Combat' 21st March 2000

if keeping Ibrahim Rugova in power was going to lead to eternal peace. Although loved as a symbol, he was a weak and ineffective leader who had failed to make any impact for a decade, and whose worst failure was not bringing Kosovo to the attention of the Dayton negotiators who had forced an end to the Bosnian war in 1995. That left a policy vacuum that was filled by the KLA. But the ludicrous partiality of the Peace Journalists for 'advocates of non-violence' blinds them to proper analysis of what is actually going on.

6.2 Northern Ireland.

The Good Friday agreement to end the conflict in Northern Ireland was an example of a situation where peace could have been lost if the Peace Journalists had had their way. Their demand is for transparency, and yet the way peace was forged in Northern Ireland was in secret talks, leading to a minutely choreographed series of public confidence-building measures. Casting a light on those talks would have killed them. There were discreet contacts between leading figures in the IRA and the British government going back into the years of the Conservative government of John Major, although they were strongly denied at the time. During all of this period the violence continued, and the public stances of politicians remained hardline. Would peace have been better served if journalists had tried to get behind the meaning of the words to unveil what was really going on? Lynch and McGoldrick say that peace initiatives were suppressed by journalists – 'the diligent and broadly based work of peace activists over many years remained below the radar of most newsdesks and reporters.' Hardly. One Northern Ireland peace group won a Nobel Prize for peace in the early years, so high was their profile; they were widely reported since they seemed to be making a difference.

But later there was a different game going on. Ironically the role of reporters in the peacemaking process in the end was the opposite to that promoted by Peace Journalists. They needed to report the bombs and the killing and the public statements while the real peace work went on behind closed doors. Bringing 'transparency' to this process would have killed it dead. Unionist and Nationalist politicians could not be photographed shaking hands, although they may have had good working relations in private. And slow careful analysis of all this did emerge, although the key headlines speaking of hard positions ('No Surrender') to their own communities, remained essential. The 'long war' in Northern Ireland was a unique crucible to study conflict journalism in such an advanced society. The reporters lived in the community, and had an intimate stake in the consequences of their own reporting, rather than being able to fly home.

There is one other piece of the Northern Ireland analysis that deserves attention. Lynch and McGoldrick pay homage to the views of Noam Chomsky, to make the case that journalists engage in 'omission, marginalisation, and distortion' in favour of the class interests of their bosses: 'the elite media...are selling privileged audiences to other businesses. It would hardly come as a surprise if the picture of the world they present were to reflect the perspectives and interests of the sellers, the buyers, and the product. ...those who occupy managerial positions in the media, or gain status within them as commentators, belong to the same privileged elites...and share perceptions reflecting their own class interests as well.'¹

On the very next page, they say that 'Business' actually wanted peace in Northern Ireland, for tourism as well as other industries. But those damned inconvenient independent-minded journalists were still going out there and reporting on the killings and the robbery and the intimidation, the daily digest of the long war – 'still stuck in the groove of War Journalism', according to Lynch and McGoldrick. So Chomsky is wrong then? If he is right, if it is true that the media is in the corporate pockets of an 'elite' that determines everything, then the occasional knee-capping would surely have been ignored in favour of tourist features about the booming economy. The fact is that bad things were still going on, and good journalists were finding out about them and reporting on them.

7. Giving oxygen to warriors

It used to be much easier than it was, when the nation was at least perceived by media owners to be supporting military action, and so there was a more cosy fit between media and military. That changed. The four biggest rows between the BBC and the government in the last quarter of a century have all been over reporting conflict. Apart from the most serious, the Kelly/Gilligan affair, there was the Falklands War, when the BBC was condemned for not saying 'we' referring to British troops, US attacks on Libya, when again the BBC was not 'patriotic' enough, and the interviewing of Republican sources in Northern Ireland. The then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said that this gave terrorists the 'oxygen of publicity.' Supporters of peace journalism would applaud her.

One of their constant complaints is that journalists do not take enough notice of the impact of their reporting, nor the reasons why events have been staged (by people seeking 'oxygen'). In *Reporting the World* they quote the former editor of the Guardian, Peter Preston, with approval. He was concerned that the fighting between anarchists and police at the G8 summit in 2001 had dominated coverage. He demanded that there should have been more media introspection, since

1. Necessary Illusions – Noam Chomsky 1989 Zmag Online version. Quoted in Peace Journalism p 197

this was 'street theatre for media consumption...we, in the reporting, are not innocent bystanders, but carriers of oxygen. We are, essentially, the story itself'.¹ It was pretty violent street theatre, rightly leading the coverage, and if it was staged for 'media consumption', no one told the anarchists at the heart of the action, who beat up several journalists and destroyed camera equipment. But Lynch and McGoldrick are even more concerned about the effect of media 'oxygen' on wars than in street demonstrations.

Apart from their long (and wrong) analysis of the media in Kosovo, they have also been critical of the media in reporting the much more complex fighting in Macedonia that immediately followed the Kosovo conflict, and flared up again two years later.

This was a very difficult story to tell. The repression of Albanians was less clear cut than in Kosovo, and so support for the guerrillas was much weaker. The politics of the country were more mature, with mainstream Albanian-origin parties operating publicly in the capital not underground, and there had been a significant foreign military force, mainly of US troops, stationed in Macedonia for several years. There was though one key similarity. Like the KLA in Kosovo, the Albanian-origin guerrilla army, the NLA, wanted to provoke government retaliation against their civilians. Lynch wrote 'If members of a group like the NLA have expectations about the likely response of journalists to their actions, they can only have arisen from the experience of news gone by. If those expectations form even a part of their calculations in planning and carrying out their actions, it means every journalist shares an unknowable proportion of the responsibility for what happens next.'² If this were true, it would impose an impossible burden on reporters. Like adherents of some austere Indian cult, wary of walking in the dust lest they trod on an insect, it would be hard for reporters to do anything at all for sharing a proportion of the 'responsibility for what happens next.' As a former senior BBC news executive Bob Jobbins put it robustly during a peace journalism seminar, 'Conflict resolution is something on which I report, not something in which I engage. A side-effect of my reporting may be that it makes conflict resolution harder or easier, but that's a judgement that is made after our reporting'. This rather sensible thought appeared, rather bafflingly, in *Reporting the World* in a section called 'Beyond cynicism'.³

Nik Gowing has persuasively argued that by 1994/5, guerrilla forces in the Great Lakes crisis that followed the Rwanda genocide, had learnt the media game, particularly the power of the 24 hour live news cycle.⁴ He says that the press were ill-equipped to deal with this. But surely it is just another part of the media equation, like the spin of a government press conference. Foreign reporting, unlike the theoretical constructs of peace journalism is messy, arduous, hazardous, and expensive. And cause and effect is not simple. For example, whatever the NLA may have wanted, it did not 'work' in Macedonia, as it had in Kosovo. NATO did not bomb their perceived oppressors.

There is much concern in the analysis by these supporters of peace journalism about media-savvy guerrillas, but surely the savviest players are the big powers. The former US Secretary of State Colin Powell once enunciated a series of pre-conditions for America to be engaged in conflict, including that the war should be winnable, there should be no other option, and there should be an exit strategy. But the most important condition for the purposes of this discourse is that there should be 'strong support for the campaign by the general public.' Winning that support is now a major part of war planning among western powers, much more powerful than the new awareness of the media among guerrilla forces.

8. Conclusion

This is not to say that everything in journalism is fine. In a world where Fox News, with its ridiculously partisan comic-book view of foreign news, can try to patent the notion of being 'Fair and Balanced', and where most British newspapers take a strong 'line' one way or another on conflicts, there are problems. Seeing the 'Sun' trying to find good news from Iraq has had a sort of black humour in recent months. The affair of Iraq's missing weapons of mass destruction raised searching questions in newsrooms on both sides of the Atlantic as it should have. Research findings showing that *most* of the British television audience believe it is the Palestinians who are 'occupying' territory, not Israelis, should set alarm bells ringing.⁵

But the solution surely is a better application of known methods, not an attempt to reinvent the wheel. The starting points of the intellectual under-pinning of peace journalism are statements of the obvious: eg the presence of journalists influences the events they cover; absolute objectivity is impossible; there may be more than two parties to a conflict. Most reporters are aware of this, and try not to influence events, take a subjective stance, or over-simplify conflicts. The key word is try, and as long as the reader/listener/viewer knows that they are trying, and not bringing another perspective,

1. Guardian – Peter Preston 23/07/01

2. Reporting the World – Jake Lynch 2002 p12

3. Ibid p24

4. www.usip.org/oc/vd/mic/micwebcast.html

5. Bad News from Israel – Greg Philo and Mike Berry Pluto Press 2004 and www.gla.ac.uk/departments/sociology/units/media/israel.pdf

then the contract between them is intact. Reporters are not innocents abroad, but complex decision-makers in an untidy world. The solutions of peace journalism make other demands, seeking a different conclusion to the shared knowledge that journalists cannot achieve perfect detachment, objectivity or context.

Even if one might agree with the Peace Journalists about any parts of their diagnosis, their solutions are often the wrong ones. In the world of press conferences and media opportunities which surround us, the only reporting which matters is off piste – finding out what is really going on. And there is simply not enough of it around. The business of reporting foreign news is under threat from many sources. The deep cuts in commercial revenues and the drive for audiences make it harder to report a wide agenda on mainstream outlets. The collapse of serious documentary-making cuts away another prop for those who want to understand world issues. The tyranny of the satellite dish tends to encourage quantity, sometimes at the expense of quality, on live 24 news channels. These are the real challenges facing journalism, best faced by clear, consistent accurate reporting that attempts to be agenda-neutral, rather than having other expectations, such as conflict-resolution, loaded on board. peace journalism's ethical checklist would fence us in to the detriment of understanding.

I support rather the sentiments of the photographer 'Guthrie', in Tom Stoppard's play *Night and Day*, who says, 'I've been around a lot of places. People do awful things to each other. But it's worse in places where everybody is kept in the dark. It really is. Information is light. Information, in itself, about anything, is light. That's all you can say really.' This is not a *passive* approach, as it is caricatured by Lynch and McGoldrick¹, who pretend that 'Guthrie' is just 'turning over stones', as if there were facts under every one. Enlightenment is a bigger idea than that.

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1. Op cit p183