**Peace Journalism works!**

*By Jake Lynch, Director, Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Sydney*

One of the most often-cited pieces of scholarship on peace journalism opens with the provocative observation that it ‘made a leap from theory to practice without the benefit of research’.

The article[[1]](#endnote--1) itself – co-authored by veteran Filipino journalist-turned academic, Cris Maslog – has been highly influential in efforts to close the gap. It uses the PJ model to derive evaluative criteria for analysing the content of ten Asian newspapers, enabling us to compare the amount of peace journalism they do. A great deal of subsequent research has followed a similar pattern, looking at media output in places including Canada, Israel, the US and UK, India, Pakistan, South Africa and many more.

Of course, these studies can only gauge the ‘manifest content’ of news, determined at the point of production. Far fewer have been experiments to find out how readers and audiences respond to PJ-inspired adjustments in framing and wording: what is sometimes called the ‘implicit content’, formed at the point of reception. That, surely, is the key to validating the ‘practice’ that Lee and Maslog refer to – the endeavours in journalist education that still account for the vast majority of PJ-related activity. If you’re training editors and reporters in peace journalism, and persuading them to try it, you want to know, surely, that it is going to make a difference?

Well, it does. My partner, Annabel McGoldrick and I have spent the last three years on a research project looking into exactly this. We developed from a study[[2]](#endnote-0) by Wilhelm Kempf, with Johan Galtung one of the pioneers of the field, and – through his journal, *Conflict and Communication* – largely responsible for enabling peace journalism to emerge as a field of academic research. Wilhelm took articles from German quality newspapers about the conflict in former Yugoslavia, then winding down in the mid-2000s. He used questionnaires to gauge reader responses, both to them and to versions adjusted to exhibit what he called ‘escalation-oriented’ and ‘de-escalation-oriented’ framings. The latter came out well – readers of those, the PJ versions, were notably more receptive to suggestions for ‘co-operative’ responses to conflict issues. Just as importantly, they liked what they were reading.

In our study, we’ve used our ‘two versions’ method, familiar from countless classes and workshops down the years, which involves showing participants two television news stories about the same incident – one produced as war journalism, the other to exhibit some peace journalism. (It’s the opening gambit in our films, *News from the Holy Land* and *Peace Journalism in the Philippines*). We’ve conducted the research in four countries – Australia, the Philippines, South Africa and Mexico; produced a total of 42 television news packages (two versions each of 21 stories) and played them to over 550 participants.

Even a little bit of peace journalism makes a difference, we found, but one or two stories in each place produced the strongest ‘interactions’. One of the most prominent themes in Australian news is the country’s response to asylum seekers, with debate generally dominated by rival politicians. Publics often profess themselves fed up of hearing about it, and when we played our participants a standard package, based on claim and counter-claim from party spokespersons, the main response was anger – directed against the ‘other side’ of the argument from the respondent’s own view.

What is often missing is people-oriented content, one of the main areas of PJ in Johan Galtung’s original model[[3]](#endnote-1). For our adjusted version, then, we included an interview with a refugee, Ali Jafari: a Hazara man who’d fled Afghanistan by boat and successfully settled in Australia. This awoke people’s empathy, and now the anger tended to be directed towards the iniquitous system in which people like Mr Jafari are locked up for long periods waiting for their claims to be processed. And there was a notably increased appetite for hearing about suggestions for change: the ‘solution orientation’ that is another key aspect of PJ.

Next, we visited Davao, on the southern Philippines island of Mindanao – a former stronghold of the outlawed New People’s Army (armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines), which has kept up an insurgency for over 40 years. Our trip coincided with the resumption of long-stalled peace negotiations involving the National Democratic Front, the legally recognised entity that speaks for the CPP-NPA, and representatives of the country’s government.

Over the few days before talks opened in faraway Oslo, the parties appeared intent on producing ‘shows of strength’. The NPA set landmines; the Armed Forces of the Philippines made high-profile arrests in ‘dawn raids’. Our war journalism version of these events – based closely on a package that went to air on a local TV station – induced familiar responses. Viewers despaired of ever solving the problem, with many professing the view that an intensified army and police ‘crackdown’ was needed.

The peace journalism version contained an interview with Ka Oris, leader of the NPA in Mindanao, and considered why people join it: supplying background and context for the conflict. We featured pictures of a peace rally, and heard from a local Protestant Bishop, and two Indigenous, or ‘Lumad’ leaders, on what they wanted to come out of the talks. Justice, in respect of deprivation and disenfranchisement, was the dominant theme of their ‘wish-list’. Viewers were now much more likely to favour holistic solutions, with optimism that peace could be produced, again with the proviso that Philippines society must be made fairer and more inclusive if the roots of the problem were to be adequately addressed.

News at the time of our arrival in South Africa was dominated by a horrific incident in which a gang of young men made a mobile phone video of themselves raping an intellectually disabled young woman, and posted it on the internet. Our PJ version ‘turned a corner’ from the latest developments in legal process, to an interview with Dumisani Rebombo, an activist and educator with a Johannesburg NGO, Sonke Gender Justice.

He told us how, over three decades ago, he too had taken part in a gang rape, considered an ‘initiation ceremony’ among his teenaged peers. Years later, he’d sought out the survivor of the attack and begged her forgiveness. She set one condition: make sure neither you, nor your son, ever does this to anyone again. At this, Dumisani began running workshops, drawing on his experience to challenge men and boys about their attitudes to women.

Viewers of the PJ version were just as horrified, and felt just as sorry for the young woman who’d suffered the gang rape, as the WJ viewers. But they were less likely to ‘externalise’ the problem: to blame ‘them down there’ for doing it, and to regard punitive responses as representing a solution. And they were significantly more likely to accept that a single incident of direct violence is constructed by many contributory factors of structural and cultural violence (albeit none of them put it in quite those terms!) It is, therefore, implicitly incumbent on everyone to think what they themselves may be able to contribute to addressing those factors, as Dumisani had done.

In the last leg of the research, our plane touched down in Mexico City at the very moment that police in the north of the country were making a gruesome discovery: 49 mutilated corpses, left by the side of a main highway. These were the latest of as many as 60,000 casualties in six years of the intensified ‘war on drugs’ under president Felipe Calderon – about to be replaced in the country’s next election, just weeks away. For one of our peace journalism versions, we interviewed Eduardo Gallo y Tello, whose 25-year-old daughter was kidnapped and killed by narco-gangsters, and who now advocates a change of approach. Regulate drugs instead, he told us, and you will drive down the price and make them less attractive to criminals.

And we met Erik Ponce, a young man from one of the toughest neighbourhoods of Ciudad Juarez, the border town – smuggling route – contested by rival cartels with a reputation as one of the most dangerous cities on earth. From drifting into a life of drugs and crime, he was rescued by a local community centre and is now studying music at university. Providing opportunities to young men like Erik is part of peace with justice, and widely understood, by viewers of the PJ version, as holding the key to ending the terrible violence.

To get an idea of how to ‘pitch’ peace journalism to the idiom and range of local media, we carried out a prior exercise in content analysis on the news in each place. The highest PJ scores were attained by South Africa’s *Mail and Guardian* newspaper. A note on its inside front cover contains a potentially important clue for the future development of peace journalism: its excellent investigative reporting is sponsored by the Open Society Institute.

Our research shows that peace journalism works. It does indeed prompt its audiences to make different meanings about key conflict issues, to be more receptive to nonviolent responses. At a time when fears are being expressed that commercial funding models will be unable to sustain good journalism, that is an invitation to non-commercial funders to step in. And if they sponsor initiatives in peace journalism, they can be confident, on the basis of our findings, that they will be making an important contribution to societal resources for peace.

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1. Lee, Seow Ting & Maslog, Crispin, 2005: ‘War or Peace journalism in Asian newspapers’, *Journal of Communication*, vol. 55, no. 2, pp. 311–329. [↑](#endnote-ref--1)
2. Kempf, Wilhelm (2007) Two experiments focusing on de-escalation orientated coverage of post-war conflicts. In: Kempf W and Shinar D *Peace journalism: The state of the art*. Berlin: Regener, pp 136-160. [↑](#endnote-ref-0)
3. In Centre for Conflict Resolution (1998) ‘Media and Conflict’, *Track Two*, ed Melissa Baumann, Vol 7 No 4, retrieved on June 7, 2012 from <http://ccrweb.ccr.uct.ac.za/archive/two/7_4/index74.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)