



AJSC

AFGHAN JOURNALISTS SAFETY COMMITTEE

کمیته مصونیت خبرنگاران افغانستان

An Introduction to Peace Journalism

Aziz Hakimi
Journalist/Media Trainer

Aknowledgement

This document is produced with the support of the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee. The content of this guide is based on the author's researches and experiences as a journalist and a media trainer and sources cited in footnotes.



Contents

What is Peace Journalism?	5
What is war journalism?	8
What are the criticisms of Peace Journalism?	10
What are Peace Journalism's objectives?	13
Can Peace Journalism help better reporting?	18
Peace Journalism in Practice	20

1

What is Peace Journalism?

In Short: *Peace Journalism is a concept that believes the media place more value on violence, war, and negative events, and demands that, instead, the media should address the root causes of conflicts in a way that highlights opportunities for peace. The term “Peace Journalism” does not refer to a particular form of journalism, but rather to the conceptual contrast between notions of Peace Journalism and conventional journalism reporting - sometimes described as “War Journalism”.*

Read More:

The phrase “Peace Journalism” can be somewhat misleading, particularly in countries like Afghanistan, which have been embroiled in protracted conflicts and there are efforts for

peace and reconciliation between the warring parties. Peace Journalism is an attribute to describe a set of different attitudes and practices in reporting with a focus on causes of conflicts and peace opportunities. The phrase Peace Journalism, therefore, highlights the conceptual contrast between this concept and so-called “War Journalism”.

“Peace Journalism” may be interpreted to mean that reporters and the media should work in support of peace efforts and thus, contribute to the success of such processes. And at first glance, this may seem logical; reporters are citizens, and their civic responsibility requires that, if they can, they should play a positive role in meeting the most important need of a society, namely peace and security.

But what if some citizens or experts do not agree with how a peace process is working? Should the media ignore



their views to protect the peace negotiations? Moreover, war, peace, ceasefire, and the like are political acts led by politicians, and, as historical experiences in Afghanistan and similar countries has proven, are often in the interests of politicians or political parties, rather than the public interest. Historically, politicians have started wars to which citizens did not agree and they have suffered the most. And it is often the politicians who decide on a political settlement without a meaningful engagement from the public.

Another example of the role of the media is in an election: voting is a national process and under normal circumstances the more citizens participate in elections, the better for the future of the country. But in some countries, for instance in Iran, part of the population may not agree with some aspects of the election and demonstrate their dissatisfaction by not participating in the voting or other similar acts. Yet, the Iranian regime compels the media to actively campaign for the election and to ignore the voices of the critics.

The fact that elections are a national process does not justify the media to ignore the critics under the pretext of protecting greater good. Similarly, is it unreasonable for Afghan media to disregard the views of citizens or experts who are against negotiating with the Taliban under the pretext that such coverages may undermine the peace process.

As far as the media coverage is

concerned, there is no difference between reporting an election and a peace process; in both cases, the media cover “political processes” to which a group of citizens may disagree with all, or part of it. Biased coverage of political processes can in itself violate the values of journalism.

Moreover, studying the academic literatures on Peace Journalism show that the concept does not promote the perception that journalists should actively advocate for certain peace negotiations or any other political processes. Peace Journalism is a concept developed based on researches that suggest that media often has a value bias towards violence, and aims to correct such biases through exploring the roots and the conflicts as well as the opportunities for society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict.

Peace Journalism theorists believe that the tendency of classic journalism to value violent events leads to presenting a largely bleak image of the world to their audiences, which can potentially perpetuate violence and reduce public belief in the possibility of peace. Peace Journalism believes that focusing on peace opportunities and the roots of conflicts can not only balance that image, but also have a significant impact on increasing public belief in the possibility of peace.

The concept of “Peace Journalism” was founded by Johan Vincent Galtung (born 24 October 1930), a Norwegian



Johan Vincent Galtung (born 24 October 1930)

sociologist who is also the founder of the academic field of peace and conflict studies. He founded the Oslo Peace Research Institute in 1959 and was its chairman until 1970. Galtung has been a prominent figure in the New Left since the 1950s, playing a major role in the evolution of sociology, political science, economics, and history.

Johan Galtung believes that the media's criterion to consider an event as "news" is often that "high-ranking countries and actors are involved in a negative event"¹. As a result, most of the contents the media produce are about powerful leaders and countries, and thus, facilitating the influence of these leaders' opinions on the lives of ordinary people. This is the result of well-known factors, including the impact of politics on the media, competition in the media market, and media perceptions of the audiences' preferences and need for information.

¹ Peace Journalism in a nutshell, by Johan Galtung: <https://bit.ly/3ykwvxQ>

Peace Journalism, however, believes that such factors are not enough to determine the newsworthiness of an event, and that the journalism mission in a democratic society goes beyond simply prioritizing "facts" by criteria such as the rank and position of the actors in an event. Peace Journalism demands that the media, as one of the main pillars of democracy and a powerful institutions of civil society, take a deeper, more responsible approach to news and evaluate its impact within the larger picture of society and politics.

2

What is war journalism?

In short: *Some social theorists believe the media have a value bias towards violence and war and thus, have labelled it as “War Journalism”, often to emphasis on the conceptual differences of today’s approach to news with “Peace Journalism”.*

Read more:

Today’s journalism (or classic journalism) has well-considered professional principles, including impartiality, fairness and accuracy. Although free media may have different codes of conduct and other media policies, almost all of them adhere to the core values of journalism. However, some scholars refer to today’s

journalism as “war journalism.”²

To avoid confusion, it should be noted that the term War Journalism is not directly relevant to war reporting and war correspondents who cover stories first-hand from a conflict zone. In conventional media environment, “War Correspondents” usually undergo special training, including personal protection and safety skills, before they are deployed to a war zone.

But “war journalism” is a general description of today’s journalism based on the notion that it has a value bias towards violence. Some scholars (including Johan Galtung) believe that media focus only on the physical effects of conflict and the positions of the armed parties, ignoring the roots of the conflict, its impact on ordinary citizens, and peace opportunities.

2 “On the role of the media for world-wide security and peace” by John Galtun, 1985: <https://bit.ly/3A6xlic>



One example of the media tendency towards negativity can be the image some international media present from Afghanistan: western media reports portray Afghanistan as a war-torn, poor, and corrupt country with an incompetent government, which is not inaccurate, but is inadequate. Sometimes negative images can also indicate a positive change. For instance, many Afghan citizens may complain about not having the opportunity to participate in political processes. This is a negative image of today's Afghan society. But the fact that public believe in political participation and view it as their right, is a positive development that has happened in the past two decades. Historically, democratic concepts and processes in Afghanistan have never strong enough to enable ordinary citizens to express their political will.

The reason for holding a book launch event, a poetry session, or the interest of young people and especially women in education and learning skills, organizing campaigns on social media and other similar activities shows the new generation's hope for future and their will to build a better one.

These and many other positive aspects are not reported in the mainstream media as often as news of war and violence, resulting in portraying a bleak image of Afghanistan with no hope for peace and stability. Of course, there are a few reasons for this: first, the media - as Galtung says - consider an event to be "news" when (A) it is negative and (B)

high-ranking actors are involved. This approach to determine what is considered as news leaves considerably less room for matters like exploring the roots of the conflicts and peace opportunities, (and that's why it is called War Journalism).

The second reason is that the media traditionally assume that negative events affect the lives of their audiences more than positive events and they see it as their duty to provide the public with the information they assume they need the most.

Third, reporting positive events is more challenging than negative ones, including the fact that positive events have hidden angles that journalists need to explore, which compared to a negative event, requires more resources. An additional challenge is that positive events usually attract fewer audiences, and this can affect a media's ability to compete in the market. Moreover, positive developments often occur in the long run and hardly fit into the technical framework of the definition of "news" - of which abruptness of an event is an important element.

3

What are the criticisms of Peace Journalism?

In Short: The fundamental disagreement between the supporters and critics of Peace Journalism is in the definition of the role of the journalists/media; while Peace Journalism believes that the reporter must be involved in and influence an event, traditional journalism emphasises on the reporter's impartiality and non-interference in events.

Read More:

Journalism values require reporters to maintain “objectivity, fairness, and impartiality” in their work, and to deal rationally rather than emotionally with subjects and events. Galtung, however, argues journalists should empathise with the victims of conflict and stand by them.

Martin Bell, a well-known BBC

journalist, also used the term Journalism of Attachment in 1997 for the first time after encountering the atrocities of the Bosnian war. Bell believed that journalists should rethink their position as merely “observers” and get involved in events. Journalists, he said, “must distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong, and victim and oppressor” and work to make the world a better place.³

However, Peace Journalism does not yet have a comprehensive and practical definition agreed upon by all media and researchers, and still remains more of an academic theory and a research topic. At the same time, the ideas of Peace Journalism are widely criticized, and some pioneering reporters see them as contradicting the principles of journalism.

For example, David Loyn, a veteran BBC correspondent, calls Peace

³ Greg McLaughlin, *The War Correspondent*, 2016, p33



Journalism a dangerous idea: “Galtung’s track record at conflict resolution is admirable. But he misunderstands our role. We are always outside observers, not players. His demand that journalists should become active participants, seeing every conflict is as a complicated matrix, echoed in a series of manuals by the ‘Reporting the World’ group in Britain, is wrong.”

Loyn believes teaching Peace Journalism in media courses should be resisted as the concept “draws journalists in as active participants, compromising their integrity and confusing their role.”⁴

Therefore, the fundamental disagreement between proponents and opponents of Peace Journalism is in the definition of the role of the media/reporters. Proponents believe that reporters’ role goes beyond merely informing their audiences of the fact and that they should get involved and aim to improve the situation. This means that journalists, in the words of Martin Bell, take the side of “good, truth and victim” against “evil, wrong and oppressor”.

In some cases, it is not too difficult for journalists to identify the cruelty and evil; for instance, when an individual or a group of people are discriminated against. Peace Journalism believes that advocacy for the discriminated individual or group is the responsibility of journalists, especially since they have first-hand access to information and to those involved, are therefore capable of

helping the victims by taking their sides.

Classic journalism, on the other hand, believes the responsibility of journalists is to report impartially the facts of the events, and that journalists and the media do not have the authority and the skills required to involve in an event, especially because issues such as serving justice is the responsibility of certain institutions within a political system. Classic journalism, however, argues that the impartial and accurate coverage of an event draws public attention (for instance to the discriminated group or individual) and public awareness often puts pressures on authorities to address the issues.

Yet, the neutrality of the media does not mean that they are indifferent to events, especially matters such as the violation of the human rights and discrimination. Almost all media consider it their responsibility to uncover such cases and given that investigative journalism is an important part of what media do to expose war crimes and corruptions, it is fair to say that they are not indifferent to the events and their work goes beyond impassively reporting the facts of an event.

In addition, the definition of truth is also another relevant matter that should be taken into consideration, in understanding journalism. Peace Journalism believes that the media should seek to discover the truth. Classic journalism believes that truth is relative and can take many forms and a journalist cannot favour one truth over another, but to report them all fairly.

⁴ Witnessing the Truth, Open Democracy, 20 February 2003 : <https://bit.ly/37grNFA>

For example, an Afghan and a Pakistani journalist reporting a border conflict are likely to have fundamentally different takes on the details of the event. Even if both are trained and experienced reporters believing in impartiality and accuracy, their reporting will still reveal two different situations. That's mainly because their sources of information about the conflict and its consequences will be different and possibly contradictory. Moreover, even the most experienced journalists may not always be completely neutral in their preferences, and it is possible that either of these two journalists will view the hypothetical border conflict from based of their own preferences.

In such a situation, one cannot label one report as wrong and the other as right. Both reports are the findings of two professional journalists, albeit looking at the event from two different angles. Journalism does not have the authority to prefer one truth over another, nor doing so can help the audience. Journalists' duty is to provide accurate and impartial information to their target audience, and it should not be forgotten that most media audiences are citizens of the country in which the media outlets operates and report in their language.

In an ideal situation the two hypothetical journalists will include one another's takes on the event in their reports to provide a more comprehensive picture of the conflict on both sides of the border. That would help their target audiences not to see

themselves as the only victims, which can potentially contribute to reduce tensions, without the journalists get involved in the event and take sides.

Nonetheless, debates on the role of journalists as "impartial observers" seem to be at least partly due to a misunderstanding of how classic journalism works. In practice, the conventional media are not - as proponents of Peace Journalism assume – oblivious or indifferent to the consequences of their reporting. The mainstream media, such as the BBC, have specific rules for covering events that could lead to social tensions or other unintended consequences. Here is what the BBC editorial guidelines says on events where media coverage can increase tension:⁵

"11.3.8 Comprehensive coverage of disturbances and riots is an important part of our news reporting. However, in addition to the specific guidelines concerning accuracy and impartiality, it is important that:

we assess the risk that, by previewing likely prospects of disturbances, we might encourage them

we withdraw immediately if we suspect our presence is inflaming the situation

we must be prepared to collect material for later use or editing, if the level of violence or disorder becomes too intrusive or graphic to be broadcast live."

Most mainstream media are well aware

⁵ BBC Guidelines, Section 11: War, Terror and Emergencies

of the fact that sometimes covering an event can increase tension and violence, and have developed specific measures to minimize inadvertent consequences. The media (especially national and local media) are usually capable of predicting such consequences and can adjust their coverages to avoid them.

4

What are Peace Journalism's objectives?

In Short: Peace Journalism seeks to explore the root causes of conflicts and examine peace opportunities rather than merely reporting the facts of violence, as is the case, the proponents of Peace Journalism believe, with conventional journalism. Critical study of Peace Journalism concepts and arguments can help reporters and media improve their work.

Read More:

Peace Journalism says it is committed to exploring root causes of conflict in order to “create opportunities for society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict.” Its history can be tracked back to 1965, when Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge analysed what makes foreign news newsworthy.

In 2010, Jake Lynch and Johan Galtung further developed the notion of Peace Journalism and argued that the media (war reporting, in particular) predominantly exhibit biases towards violence and rest on the conceptual belief that ‘conflict’ equals ‘war’. They

considered this view as problematic because it prevented the conflict to be considered also as an opportunity to search of a new harmony between the parties involved and that conflict does not necessarily develop into a war.

Peace Journalism theorists argue that media coverage of an armed clash between two warring factions (war) is the same as covering the disagreement of over the terms of peace (conflict). In covering both issues, the media tends to highlight the differences between the parties rather than explore commonalities and possibilities for peace.

Practically speaking, this to some extent is true and the media do focus more on negative events to the extent that sometimes it seems as though the media considers it their duty to only report on war, violence, humanitarian catastrophes and other bad news and issues such as peace initiatives and opportunities comes are of secondary value.

The Peace Journalism theorist have established four principles as guidelines:⁶

- 1) *Analyse how conflicts are formed: who are the parties to the conflict, what are their goals, what is the social, political and cultural background of the conflict, what are the visible and invisible signs of violence*
- 2) *Avoid “dehumanisation” of the parties involved and instead focus on revealing their objective*

6 Galtung and Lynch, 2010

and interests in the conflict

3) Offer alternative non-violent responses to conflicts and military solutions

4) Reporting peaceful initiatives that are formed at the grass roots levels of society and following the steps of agreement, reconstruction and reconciliation

But a large part of the above four points are already among the principles of journalism today, even though news of violence and war may still make more headline than positive news. That's because traditionally, newest and out of ordinary developments are given priority in news. The news structure is usually represented as an inverted triangle indicating the priority and order of information. Here is how the structure of news/report of an attack in Kabul is shown using the inverted triangle (see image):

The information about the actual incident is the most important matter. In above example, the killing and wounding of people in a suicide attack, the place of the attack and its perpetrators are the most important information that the audiences are supposed to know, which comprises the largest proportion of news.

This structure seems to give secondary importance to the issues that Peace Journalism wants to be explore more. Yet in practice, that is not the case, as analysis and in-depth reports on the events comprises the largest volume of media content. For instance, a 60-minute news program may include 15 minutes of news (produced following the above

inverted triangle structure) focusing only on the facts of the events. But the rest of the news programme is usually dedicated to the analysis of those events, presented in various formats, including interviews with experts, in-depth analytical reports and debates.

The media do allocate enough time to explore various aspects of events (including root causes of violence and peace opportunities), but since this type of contents does not usually make headlines, it may seem as if the media focus only on negative and violent events.

Also, avoiding the dehumanisation of warring parties is also a well-known standard in journalism. In fact, the principle of impartiality dictates the reporters not to judge individuals and groups and focus only on presenting facts. For example, the Afghan media do not usually describe the Taliban as a "terrorist group," even though they do refer to their attacks as "terrorism."

In fact, there is no legally universal definition for "terrorist". The United Nations Security Council may sanction individuals and organisations for their "terrorist acts" but does not directly labels them as "terrorist".

However, unlike the term "terrorist", acts of terrorism are defined in detail in the UN legal instruments⁷. Since 1963, the international community has produced 19 international legal instruments aimed at preventing

⁷ <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/international-legal-instruments>

terrorism. Almost all countries (including Afghanistan) have signed all or most of these documents, the purpose of which is to create mechanisms for cooperation and coordination between the signatory countries to prosecute acts of terrorism. But none of these documents refer to a particular organization or individual as “terrorist.”

In light of the definition provided in the international legal instruments, the media can refer to Taliban's attacks as acts of terrorism without violating their impartiality. But calling a group a “terrorist organisation” is a political act; a government may officially designate a group or individual as terrorist, yet another government may support them as freedom fighters.

The media sensitivity in using labels such as terrorist demonstrate that conventional journalism is aware of the

dangers of dehumanising individuals and groups involved in a conflict. By the same token, sanctifying one group too can also lead to dehumanising another; in Afghanistan for instance, most free media and journalists refuse to use the term “martyr” to refer to casualties on both sides of the conflict, even though the journalists have often been under direct and indirect pressure to do so by the government or other parties involved.

There is, however, no denying that the dehumanising opposition groups and critics is a long-standing practice of the media outlets owned or controlled by non-democratic governments, including the Iranian state media.

With regard to offering alternative non-violent responses to conflicts and military solutions, although the media outlets and journalist are not involved in researching such topics, they do

News Inverted Triangle

An attack left x killed and injured

The attack happened at x hour at x place

X has claimed responsibility

Info on X group and previous attacks

Analysis of X resorting to violence and its goals

Any other background information

provide an important platform through which such ideas can be publicly discussed. There are numerous academic institutions and national and international organizations who are dedicated to study peace and alternative solutions to conflicts. The media neither have the resources to conduct such researches nor doing so is part of their mission. In Afghanistan, public debate on peaceful and non-violent responses to conflicts has been a major topic in the media although, naturally the media cannot advocate for a specific response or peace solution. This is in addition to the fact that both Afghan and international media in have frequently reported on peace initiatives at gross root level.

Therefore, it can be argued that classic journalism pursues essentially the same goals that Peace Journalism emphasises upon, and that journalism values, especially the principle of neutrality, play a fundamental role in achieving those goals. What should be noted is that today's journalism has evolved as global affairs have become more complex and the technology has advanced. Some of the criticisms that Galtung and his colleagues had in the 1970s or 1980s do not necessarily apply to journalism today. The media constantly update their policies and codes of conducts to better serve the public interest.

Moreover, some of the ideas of Peace Journalism and its supporters are based on assumptions, not on practical experiences in in the field. The main demand of Peace Journalism, which

is to redefine the role of the media as the defenders of “good against evil” ignores many issues in the practical work of reporting, including the safety of journalists and the safeguarding the trust of their audiences.

In fact, there are already many organizations whose mission is to actively defend “good against evil”; for example, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch see it as their mission to advocate for the rights of the oppressed and discriminated groups and individuals. Yet, even these organizations have their own principles to ensure the information they are publishing their though media departments are accurate and fair. The target audience of these organizations initially are high-level decision-makers who are able to influence politics and governments, as well as the media organisations.

For instance, the Human Rights Watch's “Blood-Stained Hands”⁸ report on Afghanistan's civil war published in 2005, provoked strong reactions from Afghan jihadi leaders, to the extent that in 2009 the Afghan parliament, which was largely controlled by the Mujahideen leaders, passed the “National Reconciliation” law⁹, which prohibits the prosecution of Jihadi leaders on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the civil war.

This reaction demonstrates the

8 Blood-Stained Hands: Past Atrocities in Kabul and Afghanistan's Legacy of Impunity, HRW, <https://bit.ly/3CaFp3v>

9 https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan/2010/02/100216_113_afghanistan_law

profound impact of organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International at high levels. But perhaps such an effect could not have been achieved without the attention of the public media to their reports and other activities carried out by these organizations. On the other hand, the reason the media's reports on the works of such organizations attracts public attention, is the fact that the media have the necessary credibility attained by adhering to the journalism values, particularly the basic principles of impartiality, fairness and accuracy. The audiences trust that the media have a unbiased view of the events (including the reports published by organisations such as HRW) and not seek to mislead the public. This trust cannot be safeguarded, if the media publicly advocate for a political or other biased agendas.

In short, organizations such as Human Rights Watch essentially have the authority, competence, skills, and knowledge to actively and credibly engage in defending “good against evil.” By the same token, media possess the credibility, competence, skills and knowledge to recognize the importance of the positions and activities of these organizations and report them to the public.



5

Can Peace Journalism help better reporting?

In Short: *Peace Journalism introduces familiar concepts from different angles and can help reporters rethink their role and the impact of the content they produce, as well as the audience's need for deeper information.*

Read More:

Despite the criticisms that Peace Journalism faces in practice, its concepts are valuable for improving the media contents and impact. Perhaps one of Galtung's most important observations in media's criterion for reporting an event as "news" is the involvement of what he calls "high-ranking actors or countries in a negative event."¹⁰

This observation is very close to reality. The comments made by leaders of powerful countries, especially on issues related to violence and war, quickly make the headlines around the world. Politicians and their spokespersons are well acquainted with the way the media work and know how to use phrases that turn into headlines. Obviously, the media cannot ignore their statements because of the fact that the politicians' decisions affect the lives of the public. The problem, however is that the media sometimes reflect those in a way that appear more important than what they are

really are. As a result, the statements of the high-ranking actors become the main narrative, and the alternative narratives hardly find space to emerge.

For example, the statements of western officials regarding the withdrawal of western forces from Afghanistan are the main headlines these days which means the words and positions of those politicians are widely disseminated. Although the media try to cover opposing views warning about consequences of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, clearly the coverage is not sufficient to meaningfully challenge the narrative set by high ranking actors.

This situation is partly because the media - particularly the international media - do not seem to believe they have a responsibility challenge the decisions of the politicians through balancing their contents by giving enough space to alternative narratives and views. Most Western media seems to view the withdrawal from Afghanistan just another "development in the international community's mission" in the country, albeit with some negative consequences. But the image presented to public implies that despite all the probable disastrous implications for Afghanistan, withdrawal of the forces in the same process decided by key actors is inevitable. Meanwhile, the opposing views and opinions are hardly given more weight than mere "reactions".

Galtung defines the role of Peace Journalism as giving voice to all parties in conflict: "wherever there is

¹⁰ Peace Journalism in a nutshell, by Johan Galtung: <https://bit.ly/3ykwvxQ>

a conflict, one of the basic tasks of the media is to give a voice to both or all parties in the conflict. This presupposes that one knows who the parties are, which is not always so easy.”¹¹

Galtung’s emphasis on the difficulty of identifying - and recognizing - the parties to the conflict is significant. To most reporters, “party to the conflict” means armed groups that are actively engaged in fighting, but ordinary citizens are not usually been considered as a party, despite the fact the main goal of the any armed conflict is to gain control over the citizens and their lives. Yet, to the media the views and opinions of the citizens is not considered as the stance of one of the parties involved, making it easier for the warring sides to ignore the demands and suffering of the citizens without being held accountable.

Understandably, the views and opinions of citizens, unlike the armed groups, are not expressed from a specific address. But individuals experts, organizations and social groups (such as civil society institutions) represent the views and opinions of citizens, and the media can report these views as the position of a party involved in the conflict and not just the “reaction” of helpless victims caught up in a war.

According to Galtung, ignoring or downplaying the position of one of the parties to the conflict by the media can in fact contribute in escalating the conflict: “If only one side is give a voice,

it is certainly likely to be the side with which one sympathises – in doing so, the media will themselves contribute in a major way to the conflict.”

Covering all sides of the conflict - including ordinary citizens - makes each side know that the other side is also an “effective actor” and that they should consider this in their calculations.

In addition, the Peace Journalism proponents believe that journalists report cases of violence out of their context without much insight on the political, social, cultural or historical background or nature of the conflict or the key actors. Galtung urges the media to look at the conflict holistically and address the causes of the conflict, its deeper historical and structural roots and the costs of resolving these differences. These topics are researched by academic institution and similar organisations, but often goes unreported as most media are mostly caught up with reporting daily violence. This is an important challenge to be recognised by the media in Afghanistan is that reporters – especially the local and national media – who usually spend most of their time and resources on reporting day to day violent events. For instance, the Taliban’s attack to a remote district may become a headline but the displacement of the locals as a result of the same attack is usually of secondary importance.

¹¹ “On the role of the media for world-wide security and peace” by John Galtun, 1985: <https://bit.ly/3A6xlic>

6

Peace Journalism in Practice

We now know that Peace Journalism is not about political negotiation processes in Afghanistan or other countries, rather, it is a critical approach to journalism, seeking to contribute to resolve conflicts through focusing on the roots and causes of conflict and peace opportunities. Despite the disagreements among the supporters and critics of Peace Journalism, the concept as whole can help reporters to rethink their role and improve their work. In fact, a critical study of the concept shows that Peace Journalism notions can strengthen journalism values through challenging the traditional mindset on what makes news, and encouraging journalists to revisit their assumptions on their roles in reporting conflicts. Peace Journalism can help media create a better balance in their

representation of the powerful political actors and ordinary citizens, leading to a more realistic picture of the events.

This section discusses ten good practises based on Peace Journalism concepts.

1) Media are not impartial in matters of public interest

In spite of all the academic debates on the definition of public interest, we can in principle agree that public interest is anything that make the public life possible; from rule of law and the international conventions to infrastructures such as roads, schools and hospital. For instance, access to health care and education is part of the basic rights and the governments have legal responsibilities to provide it. Therefore, Taliban's attack on a hospital or destruction of roads and bridges by planting bombs and mines is not just an incident related to war, but also an attack



on the public interest and the basic rights of people. The media cannot remain impartial towards such incidents and should analyse them in lights of domestic and international laws and conventions.

But public interests and “national interests” are not the same, despite overlapping in some areas. All governments produce series of policies mainly relevant to political concepts such as independent sovereignty, national security and territorial integrity, under the name of national interests. In most undemocratic countries, the governments introduce laws that prohibits people and media from criticising the so-called national interests. However, the philosophy of free press is to have the freedom to criticise national interests with the objective of protecting public interests.

There is no law in Afghanistan banning the media from criticising the government policies, despite the fact that reporters have been under immense pressure by both the government and the opposing groups to work in accordance with their policies and wishes. The Afghan media have remained committed to public interest and journalism values.

2) Consider ordinary citizens as a party to the conflict

Suppose a Taliban spokesman says in a Twitter post that their fighters attacked a Khanabad district and following heavy fighting with Afghan forces and casualties on both sides, they took control of the district center. The Afghan officials confirmed the news, but said

that security forces had withdrawn tactically from the district. The clashes also forced hundreds of families to flee their homes and flee to a nearby district.

Most media will likely publish the news with headlines such as:

- Taliban capture Khanabad after heavy fighting

- Khanabad district falls to the Taliban,

Both headlines are true, but they focus on the Taliban and violence. Given that many news outlets are going to report the event in similar fashion, the general media focus would be mostly inclined towards the Taliban achievement. However, the headlines can always be adjusted so that it would not only not lead to strengthening the position of one side of the conflict, but also would reveal the consequences of the conflict for ordinary citizens; for instance:

- hundreds of families displaced as Taliban attack on Khanabad district

Given the above hypothetical news, this headline also states a fact, but shifts the focus from the Taliban to the local population.

Some may argue this headline does not reflect the significance of the event. But that argument would be based on the general assumptions that – in Galtung’s words - only events in which high-ranking actors are involved is considered newsworthy.

There are no rules or journalism standard suggesting that those who commit violence are more newsworthy

than those who suffer the effects of violence. Moreover, media are supposed to make sure that they represent all parties involved in a conflict, including the local populace.

Insurgent groups such as the Taliban, have a simpler mechanisms and processes than governments and official organizations in their public relations and propaganda. The main purpose of these groups is to influence the public perception and the demoralise security forces, not to provide accurate information. The Taliban are aware of the role of the free media and many Afghan journalists say that, unlike government spokespersons, the group's spokespersons are more accessible.

As a result, the Taliban's views and messages are increasingly reflected by the media. This form of media coverage - unintentionally - ends up in favour of the Taliban, and the media turn into the platform through which the Taliban carry out their propaganda. And this is another reason for the media to be sensitive about their headlines and news. Reporters must verify the information provided by the Taliban (as well as other parties involved) and make sure the way information are presented will not favour the armed parties involved in the conflict.

3) Challenge the narratives of the warring sides

The parties to an armed conflict try to reinforce their narrative of the conflict and the superiority of their military. To achieve this they resort to spreading rumours and disinformation campaigns,

including photos and videos that may have been tampered with or are irrelevant to their claims. In Afghanistan, both the Taliban and the government have been involved in spreading false information on social media and through other mediums. The Taliban, for example, recently claimed to have captured a district, posting an unverified photo of their fighters at the entrance of the city. The image was widely shared on social networks and some media outlets. As a result, it was reported that in some cases the Afghan security forces had abandoned their checkpoints even before the Taliban's attack. Meanwhile, in some cases the government spokespersons have released images of Afghan forces entering a certain area, but a google search for those photos proves they are old and unrelated to the alleged events.

While verifying information disseminated by parties involved in conflict is an important responsibility of the media, merely dismissing unreliable information is not enough, particularly the rumours that are widely circulated on the social media. Often, it is necessary that the media openly challenge claims made by the parties. Proving the inaccuracy of a widely circulated false image or a video is as important as providing accurate information to the audience.

It is however, important that in this process, the media avoid condemning the parties (Taliban or the government) and refrain from dehumanise them, as this can lead to reactions that could

endanger the safety of journalists or ordinary citizens and even escalate the violence. The media challenging false claims is part of their duty to inform their audience, not to prove insurgents or the government as liars.

4) Expose hidden impact of violence and the shortcomings of the parties involved

War has many consequences; from migration and displacement of people to the destruction of social and economic infrastructure. But the devastating effects of conflict becomes part of the daily lives in societies involved in prolonged war people and the media become less sensitive to violence and its impact. As a result, the effects of war and the role of the parties involved become less visible. In the case Afghanistan, the media do usually report the obvious effects of violence, i.e killing and displacement of people and destruction but issues such

as failure of the parties in protecting civilians, violation of human rights and other less obvious impacts of war are usually overshadowed by the actual incident. Human stories are an effective format to reveal such impacts and influence the actors and the audiences. Merely reporting the number of casualties in a suicide attacks reduce the victims to statistics and figures, but does not reveal the complex and long term impact of war on families of those killed.

5) Explore the root causes of conflicts

The assumption that the audience knows the causes for war is often incorrect. Conflicts and wars have many causes and are usually more complex than they appear. The armed parties to the conflict often state their reasons for the violence to continue in a complex, ideological, and sloganized language in order to justify their violence and show themselves as righteous and the other



sides as unjust. The Taliban, relying on strict interpretation of religious concepts, have always called their violence “jihad against the occupiers” and describe their goal as creating a pure Islamic state. In return, the Afghan government declares its goal to defend the republic and democratic as well as Islamic values. These irreconcilable stances lead to ordinary citizens and even reporters to assume that there is no possibility of peace between the two sides, and that the conflict will continue until one side defeats the other militarily.

But in reality that is not always the case; stern positions are bargaining chips in negotiations. That’s true that each side prefers to defeat the other by military force and achieve all its goals, but prolonged conflicts often turn into a war of attrition and both sides ultimately concede that they have to back down and reach a political settlement. The media do reflect the positions of the parties involved and even challenge their conflicting stances, but rarely explore the root causes of the conflict beyond what the parties themselves may state. Once again, it should be reminded that the purpose of challenging the positions of the warring sides is not to prove the lies the spokespersons or other officials may tell, but to inform the public. In fact, while the goal of journalism is to defend the public interest, use of aggressive language is not constructive and cannot be justified. Reporters can turn interviews and other similar opportunities into a constructive dialogue providing the representatives

of the groups with the opportunity to explain in simple language the causes of the conflict and the conditions that can lead to peace. Such discussions also have a vital role in painting a more accurate and comprehensive picture of the reality.

6) Explore alternative non-violent solutions

There are numerous experts, analysts, civil society organisations and academic institutions who are focused on studying and researching different aspects of conflicts and peace. But the results of their works are often overshadowed by the daily violence that makes up the largest bulk of the news. Another problem is that such studies are usually published in form of academic papers in relatively complex language, and simplifying the concepts for the benefit of the public and the parties involved in conflict is time consuming.

In spite of that, these institutions and experts have the necessary qualification and resources to conduct such researches. The media should be in regular contact with these institutions and experts and report on their activities and findings to the public. The views of institutions and experts who are specifically focused on studying conflict and peace are necessary for balancing diversity of ideas and ensure that the image that the media presents to its audience is not entirely bleak and frustrating.

7) Highlight public peace initiatives

If we reckon that ordinary people should be considered as one side of

the conflict, then their stances are as important as that of the armed parties. Although the Afghan media cover peace initiatives by citizens, it is important that they are valued and treated as the stance of one side of the conflict. It is vital that the media, in addition to informing the public about the positions of the armed parties to the conflict, convey the views expressed by the ordinary citizens.

8) *Balance the headlines*

The headlines and top news of the day have a significant role in setting the tone for the audience as they form a large chunk of the media contents on the same day. For instance, a Taliban spokesman says their fighters intend to attack a major city in the coming days. Given the current security situation, such a statement will attract a lot of attention, despite the possibility that the Taliban's goal might simply be to intimidate the public and weaken the morale of the security forces.

How can the media avoid helping the Taliban's propaganda while providing timely and accurate information to their audiences? To answer this question, we must keep in mind that that psychological warfare is an effective means for all sides in a conflict to influence the public opinions. Spokespersons and officials of the warring parties are usually trained in strategic communication and engaging with the media, and they carefully choose words that will turn into headlines. That is why the representatives of

groups involved in conflict often avoid answering journalists' questions explicitly and instead focus on sending specific messages to public.

In most cases, despite the fact the statements of the spokespersons may be misleading or exaggerated, reporters usually reflect their words one way or another. It is important that such controversial statements be examined carefully and only the parts that have real values are published in a way that will not amount to promoting the parties' positions. Such statement do not have to be the main headlines and it is always possible to balance them with background information.

For instance, in the case of the above hypothetical news, editors and reporters must find out whether there are any independent sources confirming that the Taliban might actually carry out their threat of attacking that city. Such evidences could include movement of the Taliban forces around the city, the mass migration of local residents, and other reliable sources. In that case, all these information should be considered as part of the same news and the focus should not be solely on the Taliban's threat. If, however, there are no strong credible evidence, the editors may decide not to report the statement, or perhaps refer to it in background information of other relevant news. But the decision to disregard such threats should be taken cautiously, as not informing the public of a potential threat, may endanger the lives ordinary citizens

who could have avoided danger, had they been informed of it in advance. In all cases, the editors must consider the public interests and safety of their audiences in making such decisions.

9) Avoid escalating the violence

In 2011, angry demonstrators in the city of Mazar-e-Sharif attacked the United Nations (UNAMA) office, killing eight foreign and four domestic workers. Two of the victims were beheaded. The incident came after the media reported that a priest in the United States had set fire to a copy of the Koran.

This and similar incidents show how coverage of controversial events can escalate violence and conflict. It is not always possible to predict the consequences of a report, but being wary of the fact that reporting potentially sensitive issues can ensue serious consequences can reduce the role of the media in the spread of violence. The argument that the reporters' duty is merely to inform public of the

facts and they are not responsible for the consequences their report is not reasonable. Reporting facts is part of a greater goal, which protecting the public interests and escalation of violence clearly is not in the interest of the public.

In addition, sometimes coverage of an event (such as live coverage of a riot) can help escalate it. In such cases the media should be prepared to postpone their reporting of the event to another time.

10) Study the concepts and ideas of Peace Journalism

Although this introduction seeks to highlight the most important concepts of Peace Journalism, further reading about the topic is particularly useful for the Afghan journalists. Despite the all the criticism, the concepts of Peace Journalism can help journalists and media to improve their work and helps them challenges their assumptions using different criteria.

