

A 17-point plan for practical Peace Journalism

The following 17 points are practical suggestions for devising and applying such a strategy to re-balance the reporting of conflicts, countering the distorting influence of unexamined War Journalism.

1. AVOID portraying a conflict as consisting of only two parties contesting the same goal(s). The logical outcome is for one to win and the other to lose.

INSTEAD *try to DISAGGREGATE the two parties into many smaller groups, with many needs and interests, pursuing many goals*, opening up more creative potential for a range of outcomes. *And ask yourself* – who else is involved, and how?

2. AVOID accepting stark distinctions between ‘self’ and ‘other’. These can be used to build the sense that another party is a ‘threat’ or ‘beyond the pale’ of civilised behaviour. Both are key justifications for violence.

INSTEAD *seek the ‘other’ in the ‘self’ and vice versa*. If a party is presenting itself as ‘the goodies’, ask questions about how different its behaviour really is to that it ascribes to the other – isn’t it ashamed of itself?

3. AVOID treating a conflict as if it is only going on in the place and at the time that violence is occurring.

INSTEAD *try to trace the links and consequences* for people in other places now and in the future. Ask:

- Who are all the people with a stake in the outcome?
- How do these stakeholders relate to each other?
- Who gains from the conflict?
- What are they doing to influence the conflict?
- What will happen if...?
- What lessons will people draw from watching these events unfold as part of a global audience? How will they enter the calculations of parties to future conflicts near and far?

4. AVOID assessing the merits of a violent action or policy of violence in terms of its visible effects only.

INSTEAD *try to find ways of reporting on the invisible effects*, e.g. the long-term consequences of psychological damage and trauma, perhaps increasing the likelihood that those affected will be violent in future, either against other people or, as a group, against other groups or other countries.

5. AVOID letting parties define themselves by simply quoting their leaders’ restatements of familiar demands or positions.

INSTEAD *enquire for yourself into goals, needs and interests:*

- How are people on the ground affected by the conflict in everyday life?
- What do they want changed?
- Who else is speaking up for them besides their political leaders? Answers to this are often surprisingly accessible, as even many small grassroots organisations now have websites.
- Is the position stated by their leaders the only way or the best way to achieve the changes they want?
- This may help to empower parties to clarify their needs and interests and articulate their goals, making creative outcomes more likely.

6. AVOID concentrating always on what divides the parties, on the differences between what each say they want.

INSTEAD *try asking questions which may reveal areas of common ground*, and leading your report with answers which suggest that at least some goals, needs and interests may be compatible, or shared.

7. AVOID only reporting the violent acts and describing ‘the horror’. If you exclude everything else, you suggest that the only explanation for violence is previous violence (revenge); the only remedy, more violence (coercion/punishment).

INSTEAD *show how people have been blocked and frustrated or deprived* in everyday life as a way of explaining how the conditions for violence are being produced.

8. AVOID blaming someone for ‘starting it’.

INSTEAD *try looking at how shared problems and issues are leading to consequences which all the parties say they never intended.*

9. AVOID focusing exclusively on the suffering, fears and grievances of only one party. This divides the parties into ‘villains’ and ‘victims’ and suggests that coercing or punishing the villains represents a solution.

INSTEAD *treat as equally newsworthy the suffering, fears and grievances of all parties.*

10. AVOID ‘victimising’ language like ‘devastated’, ‘defenceless’, ‘pathetic’, ‘tragedy’ which only tells us what has been done to and could be done *for* a group of people by others. This is dis-empowering and limits the options for change.

INSTEAD *report on what has been done and could be done by the people.* Don’t just ask them how they feel; also ask them how they are coping and what they think. Can they suggest any solutions?

11. AVOID the imprecise use of emotive words to describe what has happened to people, such as the following:

- ‘Genocide’ literally means the wiping-out of an entire people – in UN terminology today, the killing of more than half a million people.
- ‘Tragedy’ is a form of drama, originally Greek, in which someone’s fault or weakness ultimately proves his or her undoing.
- ‘Assassination’ is the murder of a head of state.
- ‘Massacre’ is the deliberate killing of people known to be unarmed and defenceless. Are we sure? Or do we not know? Might these people have died in battle?
- ‘Systematic’ – e.g. raping, or forcing people from their homes. Has it really been organised in a deliberate pattern, or have there been a number of unrelated, albeit extremely nasty, incidents?

INSTEAD *always be precise about what we know*. Do not minimise suffering but reserve the strongest language for the gravest situations or you will beggar the language and help to justify disproportionate responses which escalate the violence.

12. AVOID demonising adjectives like ‘vicious’, ‘cruel’, ‘brutal’, ‘barbaric’. These always describe one party’s view of what another party has done. To use them puts the journalist on that side and helps to justify an escalation of violence.

INSTEAD *report what you know about the wrongdoing* and give as much information as you can about the reliability of other people’s reports or descriptions of it. If it is still being investigated, say so, as a caution that the truth may not yet be known.

13. AVOID demonising labels like ‘terrorist’, ‘extremist’, ‘fanatic’, ‘fundamentalist’. These are always given by ‘us’ to ‘them’. No one ever uses them to describe himself or herself. And they are difficult, if not impossible, to apply impartially in every instance where they would be warranted. (What, for instance, is a ‘fundamentalist regime’? A working definition might be – an unelected government with leaders avowedly guided by religious belief. But many journalists would find it very difficult, in practice, so to describe the Bush administration, appointed to power by the US Supreme Court, in 2000, despite garnering half a million fewer votes than the Democrat, Al Gore.)

In practice, therefore, to use such labels is always to take sides. They also generally mean the people labelled are unreasonable, which weakens the case for reasoning (negotiating) with them.

INSTEAD *try calling people by the names they give themselves*. Or be more precise in your descriptions – e.g. ‘bombers’ and, for the attacks of September 11 th, ‘suicide hijackers’ are both less partisan and give more information than ‘terrorists’.

14. AVOID focusing exclusively on the human rights abuses, misdemeanours and wrongdoings of *only* one side.

INSTEAD *try to name ALL wrongdoers*, and treat allegations made by all parties in a conflict equally seriously. This means, not taking at face value, but instead making equal efforts to establish whether any evidence exists to back them up, treating the victims with equal respect and the finding and punishing of all wrongdoers as being of equal importance.

15. AVOID making an opinion or claim seem like an established fact. This is how propaganda works – e.g. the campaign, primarily aimed at US and UK media, to link Saddam Hussein to ‘international terrorism’ in early 2002. Under a headline linking Iraq to the Taliban and Al Qaeda, came the claim that ‘Iraqi military intelligence officers are *said to be* assisting extreme Palestinian groups in attacks on Israel... [emphasis added]’. ‘Said to be’ obscures the question of who is doing the saying. See also ‘thought to be’, ‘it’s being seen as’, etc.

INSTEAD *tell your readers or your audience who said what*. That way you avoid implicitly signing up yourself and your news service to the allegations made by one party in the conflict against another.

16. AVOID greeting the signing of documents by leaders which bring about military victory or a ceasefire as necessarily creating peace.

INSTEAD try to report on the issues which remain, and on the needs and interests of those affected. What has to happen in order to remove incentives for further acts of violence?

Ask what is being done to strengthen the means on the ground to handle and resolve conflict non-violently, to address development or structural needs in the society and to create a culture of peace?

17. AVOID waiting for leaders on ‘our’ side to suggest or offer solutions.

INSTEAD *pick up and explore peace initiatives wherever they come from*. Ask questions of politicians, – e.g. about ideas put forward by grassroots organisations. Assess peace perspectives against what you know about the issues the parties are really trying to address; do not simply ignore them because they don’t coincide with established positions. Include images of a solution, however partial or fragmentary – they may help to stimulate dialogue.

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