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### **Peace journalism: the relevance of a proposal**

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## Peace journalism: the relevance of a proposal

Adriana Valente\*

### Abstract

In contrast to the journalism defined as “war journalism”, “peace journalism” is entrusted with a delicate and crucial task: to go beyond, to transcend – in line with Galtung's theoretical framework – the reasons, dynamics, concepts, and sources closely linked to a war-oriented perspective, and to lay the foundations for mechanisms of understanding and the construction of solid peace scenarios. The objective of this work is to highlight the essential elements of the peace journalism paradigm, capturing its innovative content and the critical issues that have emerged in the scientific debate, comparing them with some of the central themes of media and journalism reflection, as well as with trends in textual analysis and critical discourse analysis, in order to contribute to an assessment of the prospects and relevance of Galtung's proposal.

**Keywords:** Peace journalism, war journalism, media power, sources, framing

### Abstract

A differenza del giornalismo definito come “giornalismo di guerra”, il “giornalismo di pace” ha un compito delicato e cruciale: andare oltre, trascendere – in linea con il quadro teorico di Galtung – le ragioni, le dinamiche, i concetti e le fonti strettamente legati a una prospettiva orientata alla guerra, e gettare le basi per meccanismi di comprensione e la costruzione di scenari di pace solidi. L'obiettivo di questo lavoro è quello di evidenziare gli elementi essenziali del paradigma del giornalismo di pace, cogliendone i contenuti innovativi e le questioni critiche emerse nel dibattito scientifico, confrontandoli con alcuni dei temi centrali della riflessione sui media e sul giornalismo, nonché con le tendenze nell'analisi testuale e nell'analisi critica del discorso, al fine di contribuire a una valutazione delle prospettive e della rilevanza della proposta di Galtung.

**Parole chiave:** Giornalismo di pace, giornalismo di guerra, potere dei media, fonti, framing

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## **1. The central role of journalism in peace processes**

### *1.1 Journalism and the culture of peace*

Reflection on the role of journalism in promoting peace processes and combating violence in all its forms has been central to Johan Galtung's thinking. This could not be otherwise, given the attention he paid to the set of factors that contribute to determining that “positive peace” (Galtung 2013a) which, alongside a void – a void of considerable importance, the absence of war – is accompanied by a fullness of factors, actions and relationships that contribute to the achievement, maintenance and construction of peaceful societies.

Among these factors, the activity of the media takes on a key importance. It is no coincidence that among the international documents, and UN documents in particular, which since 1945 have incorporated and promoted the expectation of a full right to peace, the Declaration of the General Assembly on a Culture of Peace (UN 1999) clearly includes information among the key factors for the realisation of the peace project. Journalism—like political actors and key social players—is assigned a key role (Art. 8), just as the educational and informative function of the media in contributing to the promotion of a culture of peace is recognised (Art. 7). One may wonder whether this recognition of the role of information by the United Nations corresponds—in general and in this historical period—to a real capacity for commitment and action on the part of the media, or whether it amounts instead to an expectation, an encouragement, a timid hypothesis, as such contingent and deferrable.

For Galtung, peace journalism plays a central role in the transformative process that leads to the construction of peaceful societies; it is, in fact, closely linked to a positive view of conflict, the result of a spiritual richness that Galtung himself (2011) claims to have drawn from Hinduism and which, not surprisingly, is found in Gandhi's concept of conflict as a challenge to mutual understanding; conflict is, therefore, an ethical challenge (Galtung 2006). The challenge “to be creative, preserving the parties, avoiding destruction” (Galtung 2011) also passes through journalism, guiding the entire paradigm of peace journalism. It is no coincidence that Gandhi, a central figure in the construction of Galtung's thought, had such high regard for the role of information and communication, and was also the founder

of three newspapers. The aim of this paper is to recall the essential elements of the paradigm of peace journalism, capturing its innovative content and critical issues that have emerged in scientific debate, comparing them with some of the central themes of media reflection and with trends in textual analysis and critical discourse analysis, in order to contribute to an assessment of the prospects and relevance of Galtung's proposal.

In stark contrast to what is defined as “war journalism”, “peace journalism” is entrusted with a disruptive task: to go beyond, to transcend—in line with Galtung's theoretical approach—the reasons and dynamics closely connected to a warmongering perspective and to lay the foundations for mechanisms of understanding and building solid scenarios of peace.

No wonder Galtung makes no concessions to a journalistic model centred on military tactics and strategy: the *stratos agos*, the one who leads armies, the one who is believed to have the power to determine the outcome of the conflict, corresponds to a profile far removed from the one Galtung is interested in. Rather, people and not leaders, legitimate objectives and not positions of strength, historical causes and not triggers, comparisons and not proclamations, insights and not simplifications, in-depth analysis and not sensationalism, are among the ingredients to be combined to provide answers other than the binary logic of who wins and who loses; a logic that can only lead to the perpetuation of chains of anger, resentment, humiliation, and claims to glory to be asserted or regained. On 13 January 1915, Léonie La Fontaine wrote to her brother, Nobel Peace Prize winner Henri La Fontaine: “Once this horrible storm has passed, what will we do with our hatred if not foment new reasons for war?”. This consideration is very clear in Galtung's thinking.

### *1.2 Notes on peace journalism and the power of the media*

The close link between peace journalism and the process of building peaceful societies means that practically all the key themes of media sociology are connected to it—from framing and the construction of public narratives to ethical issues and the construction of identities—even where the connection has not been explicitly stated or thoroughly investigated. There are also many connections in the fields of communication and linguistics: reflections on the rhetoric of war as an aspect of violence (Booth 2005) led, in

the 1990s, to the emergence of the field of 'peace linguistics' (Curtis 2022; De Matos 2006), aimed at investigating the relationship between linguistic methods, results and applications and the promotion of peace and human rights at a global level.

It is not possible to retrace these connections here. I will limit myself to a brief overview of the relationship between media and power.

Galtung began to develop the paradigm of peace journalism in the 1960s, while the Vietnam War was raging and the media was beginning to take a critical stance towards the war. His reflections are based on an awareness of the role played by the media, more or less deliberately, in war propaganda.

Galtung's proposal comes in a context of growing debate on the media, aimed at analysing—and weighing up in various ways—the media's ability to influence public discourse. Classical media theories—appropriately reviewed by Marini (2017), who critically compares the constructions of Edelman, Hall, Altheide and Snow—have hypothesised different paths through which discourse becomes politically active as a cultural form, attributing to the media a primary, secondary or competing role in each case. For Altheide, the media contribute to social definitions, i.e. they have the ability to define situations that are valid for a broader context, while at the same time being part of the construction of the identity process—both in terms of homogeneity and difference—and acting on social interaction, and are therefore crucial in any attempt to understand the functioning of power in societies (Altheide 2019). In particular, the relationship between media, power and social control has been highlighted (Chomsky 2020; Chomsky & Hermann 2008), which places information at the basis of the process of power constitution in our societies (Castells 2009). This echoes Foucault's notion of the closeness between power and knowledge, a power that is exercised “rather than possessed” (Foucault 1976); a power that, although configured in various ways by Foucault, Bourdieu and Habermas, nevertheless plays a central role in human thought and action (Christensen 2024).

Although Galtung focuses more on reflection on the powerful than on the places and ways in which power is exercised, his theoretical construction is in fact based on the assumption

that much of public life takes on the interpretative frames provided by the media and that social hierarchies represent, in the words of Meyrowitz (1985), communicative hierarchies.

## **2. Principles and approaches of peace journalism**

### *2.1 Galtung's proposal for peace journalism*

The medical culture—so dear and familiar to Johan Galtung—leads him to use metaphors related to it to illustrate the salient elements of common journalistic practice, which he contrasts with the principles of peace journalism: the image is that of a hypothetical science journalist, focused on recounting the process of a disease as if it were a sports match, reporting on the struggle between the two sides, the disease and the body, cheering for the latter to win; this type of journalism, he concludes, would be disease-oriented and the journalist could be defined as a “disease correspondent”, little concerned with highlighting the means, especially non-violent ones, by which the disease could be overcome, as well as the role of preventive medicine and lifestyles (Galtung & Fisher, 2013b).

Outside the medical metaphor, the shortcut that is often taken in media reporting is to focus attention on war and violence—often confused with conflict—as an arena in which two contenders face each other to impose their objectives—and in particular the objective of victory—counting the losses in terms of deaths, injuries and material damage. Galtung's approach to nonviolent conflict transformation offers a different perspective that peace journalism cannot ignore: the main approach cannot fail to consider conflict as a challenge oriented towards research: research into the plurality of root causes and parties involved, the visible and invisible effects of violence, legitimate and illegitimate objectives, and ideas—possibly new and creative ones—aimed at resolving conflicts in the context of a peace to be built or consolidated.

Journalism is therefore assigned a responsibility that may appear unprecedented, but which is directly linked to the Gandhian approach: to promote a paradigm shift (Galtung & Lynch 2010), to break out of the mould and, by helping to identify and make visible the forces in favour of peace, to facilitate the transformation of conflict. Whether and to what

extent this attribution of responsibility is possible, realistic or visionary is one of the main parameters of the consensus and criticism that have surrounded Galtung's proposal.

Galtung's paradigm of peace journalism is built around four fundamental evaluation criteria – it is oriented towards peace and conflict, truth, people and solutions – as opposed to the central attributes of so-called war journalism, which is oriented towards war and violence, propaganda, the elite and victory (Galtung & Fisher 2013b).

Firstly, peace journalism should aim to reconstruct all the factors that lead to the outbreak, resumption and prolongation of conflict, rather than limiting its analysis of causes and possible outcomes to the main arena, which is only the central and most visible part of the theater of conflict, and the one most susceptible to propaganda.

According to Galtung, journalism should bring to light the various causes, layered over time, the parties involved, variously positioned in space, with their own objectives—legitimate and illegitimate—which are frequently assorted in various ways, aspects that bring it closer to investigative journalism. It should also be proactive rather than reactive journalism, oriented towards prevention rather than hunting for episodes of direct violence; it should also reveal “the invisible effects of violence”, showing the ethical and cultural losses for everyone, and not limit itself to the rhetoric of zero-sum conflict, whereby the loss of one side, the loser, would be balanced by the victory of the other, the winner. To make conflicts transparent, it would be necessary to go back in time; on the contrary, the media rarely show wars as historical processes, instead giving precedence to propaganda in favor of one or the other warring faction (Salio 2017).

But, we might ask ourselves, how far back should we go in analyzing conflicts that have degenerated and been exacerbated by decades of war or even longer periods of hostility? How can we avoid the risk of reinforcing rather than weakening the opposition between warring groups and countries? Given the difficulty of maintaining, even more than a level of depth, a methodological rigour that brings journalism closer to historical research, the process of reconstructing the chain of causes over time, which is inevitably incomplete, should be aimed at making visible the complexity of the causes and the variability of the points of view that can be adopted when looking at a conflict that persists over time. This

implies making conflicts transparent, giving a voice to all parties involved, their reasons and their legitimate interests, which requires not only empathy and understanding but, above all, the intention to humanize the enemy. This means bringing the parties involved closer together, without indulging in practices of confrontation and metaphors of binary opposition – us vs. them – or demonizing the adversary, practices which, if a few decades ago were sporadic and generally sanctioned, are now increasingly present in public discourse. It is impossible to hide the fact that this perspective requires economic resources, time, accessible sources and a type of media management that values professionalism. The availability of resources is a significant obstacle, which will be identified as one of the problems and limitations of peace journalism.

Secondly, good journalism, whether peace journalism or not (Galtung & Fisher 2013b), should be based on truth. Although the pursuit of truth is not the sole preserve of peace journalism, this goal seems increasingly distant if we confine ourselves to a specific perspective, that of our own country, our own alliance, or even simply our own cultural affiliation. The call for truth should not be understood in a normative sense, far from it: among its prerequisites, it also includes the ability and commitment not to become attached to one's own point of view and to distance oneself from the easy refuge provided by the dominant discourse. And yet, the difficulty of formulating truly independent thought brings us back to those forms of social loyalty in which isolation is feared more than error, as highlighted by Noelle-Neumann (the world of journalism is not immune).

A third pillar of peace journalism is being people-oriented, which includes a series of “considerations” related to naming correctly and objectively, i.e. distinguishing entire peoples from individual criminals and criminals from crimes, focusing instead on people who are bearers of peace; it also includes giving a voice to those who do not have one, presenting suffering in all its forms and wherever it comes from, thus not only showing “our” suffering.

However, even the representation of suffering presents many unknowns; although it has not been the subject of the main criticisms of the model, it is a particularly sensitive issue due to the frequent instrumental use of suffering—of civilians in particular—with the aim not so much of initiating a process of transformation as of highlighting the devastation

wrought by the other side, in contrast to our own missions, which are presented as non-violent or even humanitarian. Thus, even the representation of suffering can become a tool of propaganda. Furthermore, it is controversial whether the representation of suffering elicits a clear reaction of opposition to violence in viewers. Among the voices that have expressed themselves on this point, it is worth mentioning those of two image scholars, Susan Sontag and Luc Boltanski. The former takes up the doubt expressed by Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas* and, in retracing the history of war reporting since the end of the 19th century, with special reference to the documentation of images, raises the question of the possible habituation of the audience to such displays (Sontag 2021). Luc Boltanski, on the other hand, delves into the types of images represented in the spectacle of suffering (Boltanski 2000), observing that only some of them, by evoking an aesthetic experience, awaken in the viewer a real identification and, consequently, a drive to action (Valente et al 2021; Tudisca and Valente, 2024).

The final pillar identified by Galtung for the construction of peace journalism—which underpins all the previous points—is to be oriented towards “solution” rather than “victory”: that is, being aimed at highlighting possible peace initiatives, together with a commitment to preventing further wars, focusing on resolution, reconstruction and reconciliation, three central factors for building a true culture of peace capable of avoiding both the emergence of new armed conflicts and the rush to consider such conflicts over simply because they are classified as low-intensity conflicts. This is reported by data from the Global Peace Index (Institute for Economics & Peace 2024): there is a continuous increase in conflicts classified as low intensity, which end without a negotiated outcome but are highly likely to give rise to new escalations of violence.

## **2. Comments and guidelines on peace journalism**

Galtung's proposal provides a basis for further reflection and contributions. Lee & Maslog (2005) put forward a model of peace journalism based on Galtung's proposal, but articulated in 13 elements, giving greater visibility to factors such as demonization, victimization and the use of emotionally charged language.

Based on the work of Lee and Malsog, Neumann & Fahmy (2016) constructed, in a non-dichotomous form, nine indicators of war journalism and nine of peace journalism, which formed the basis for surveys carried out both by the authors themselves and by others (Hussain & Ahmad 2022). The results of both surveys are consistent and show that journalists regularly opt for practices typical of both war journalism and peace journalism, supporting the thesis that media content tends to fall halfway between the two forms of journalism (Hussain & Ahmad 2022).

In exploring the trends of the two types of journalism, some authors (Hussain & Ahmad 2022; Hussain & Lybch 2018; Kempf 2017; Lee 2010; Lynch 2008; Lee & Maslog 2005) have distinguished between active and passive war and peace journalism: active war journalism would openly promote war, presenting elite-oriented coverage, focusing primarily on the differences between the belligerents and promoting victory as the only option, while passive war journalism, while remaining reactive and not proactive, would only become active when violence became evident, and then report on its visible effects. For its part, passive peace journalism would focus on the invisible effects of violence, while still giving due coverage to the voices and opinions of ordinary people, while only active peace journalism would act proactively, showing empathy and facilitating communication between the parties in conflict. While peace and war journalism frequently coexist, Hussain and Ahmad (2022) have shown that, in the contexts examined, journalistic practice seems to favour the combination of active war journalism and passive peace journalism, leaving very little room for the fulfillment of full peace journalism.

Research on peace journalism has also focused in recent years on frame analysis, with the aim of analysing media narratives relating to both situations of direct violence, such as war in particular (Elham *et al.* 2021; Auzarmi 2024; Kozman & Cozma 2024; Garcia-Perdomo *et al.* 2024), and situations of cultural or structural violence, evident in the representation of migration (Valente *et al.* 2021).

The analyses show that the privileged use of sources from the belligerent group considered close to journalists and recipients of the message, which often coincide, is a constant. The use of institutional sources also seems to prevail, as shown, for example, by the study by Wang, Sannusi and Kadir (2024) on the sources used by CNN and CCTV

during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, although the analysis carried out by El Damanhoury Saleh and Lebovic (2025) on articles published on the Al Jazeera English and BBC websites during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shows a high number of Israeli and, above all, Palestinian civilians among the sources.

Other studies aimed at analyzing social media from the perspective of peace journalism focus instead on hate speech. The contribution by Pinto and Bhadra (2024) explores the role of journalism, and in particular independent journalism, as a possible mediator to contain the social damage caused by the effects of digital disinformation and hate speech, which calls into question the concepts of disinformation, misinformation and post-truth (Hassan & Pinelli 2022).

### **3. Criticism and prospects: the relevance of a proposal**

One of the main challenges facing peace journalism is to show how it differs from good journalism, whether it is opposed to it, or whether it constitutes a separate paradigm, close to but distinct from quality journalism.

Hanitzsch (2007) observes how many of the principles of peace journalism are deeply rooted in quality journalism, while also highlighting the problems associated with the actual feasibility of peace journalism, reflecting on how realistic this proposal really is. The proposal for peace journalism would only take into account the individual component of journalistic work, ignoring structural constraints, the lack of resources in terms of personnel and time, and constraints related to editorial procedures, hierarchies and the availability of sources.

Loyn takes an extreme position, arguing that peace journalism is completely opposed to good journalism because, in promoting a particular perspective, albeit that of peace, it would end up limiting both the drive to seek the truth and the goal of “truthfulness” (Loyn 2007), linked to accuracy and reliability.

However, this criticism seems to refer more to attachment journalism or participatory journalism, which in various ways claim a role of active participation, than to peace

journalism, which, despite the empathetic content that must characterize it, aims to investigate the causes, objectives and aspirations of all parties involved, thus reinforcing the tendency towards impartiality in journalistic work.

But both Loyn & Hanitzsch have a second, more thorny criticism in store: peace journalism lacks the explanatory power of a theory (Lyon, 2007), a solid theoretical basis, an epistemological foundation that justifies its practices and approaches (Hanitzsch 2007). To respond to these objections, reference has been made both to media sociology – which can provide important constructs, including those related to the relationship between media and power or how media influence and reflect social dynamics, including linguistic representations, and contribute to shaping public perceptions and social norms – and to critical realism and critical pragmatism to analyze the relationship between theory and practice (Hussain & Ahmad 2022).

It has also been noted that a peace process is characterized by “boring negotiations”, whereas journalism requires dramatization (Hanitzsch 2007), while Wolfsfeld's critique draws on the paradigm of secrecy, according to which significant developments within a peace process should take place in secret, behind closed doors (Wolfsfeld 1997, 67), which would not be facilitated by the paradigm of peace journalism. A possible response can already be found in Jeremy Bentham, one of the philosophers who attempted a Project for Universal and Perpetual Peace, who argued that if international politics is to be understood as a service to citizens, the work of foreign policy makers must be subject to rules and controls (Archibugi & Voltaggio 1991), asserting, among other things, that “the principle that requires a veil of secrecy to be cast over the work of the Foreign Office is pernicious in the extreme, as it is fraught with harmful effects greater than anything that could possibly result from a total absence of secrecy” (Bentham 1789).

The same monographic issue dedicated to the controversy over peace journalism in the journal *Conflict & Communication Online*, in which Loyn and Hanitzsch formulated their criticisms, also featured supporting contributions from Jake Lynch and Samuel Peleg. The former (Lynch 1997), in addition to claiming that peace journalism complies with the principle of objectivity, highlighted the urgent need for journalism to make as much use as possible of passive sources, i.e. those that do not come to journalists but have to be

discovered and researched, naturally with the time and resources to do so. Journalists working on the front line, such as Piro, highlight the difficulty and enormous individual commitment involved, for example, in searching for sources that are not only non-institutional but also have not been in some way “chosen by the authorities” (Piro 2022). To this end, the self-awareness of journalists and the commitment of the entire media system should be combined with mobilization in civil society to challenge and complement institutional practices.

In fact, it is difficult to implement the values of peace journalism in traditional news formats, where space and time constraints do not allow for detailed coverage of the background and causes of violence, as well as its consequences. The media system's demand for reduced complexity leads to the use of highly standardized narrative patterns, which are often incompatible with the requirements of peace journalism. To the further objection (Loyn 2007) that it is not journalism but politics that should promote peace, Samuel Pereg (2007) responds that it is precisely in the epistemological proposal of peace journalism that he sees an opportunity to restore journalism to its traditional role as the fourth estate, and thus to take on the task and responsibility of telling the story independently of other powers or authorities.

In conclusion, if the media are not only the exclusive expression of dominant values but interact with the multiplicity of social narratives, we need to rethink how to promote the renewal of media discourse and overcome those aspects of society that lead to journalism devoid of a sense of peace. An opportunity may come precisely from the paradigm of peace journalism.

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